

2000

# All for the good

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**ALL FOR THE GOOD**

**A Thesis**

**Presented to**

**The Faculty of the Department of English**

**San Jose State University**

**In Partial Fulfillment**

**of the Requirements for the Degree**

**Master of Arts**

**By**

**Inga L. Silva**

**August 2000**

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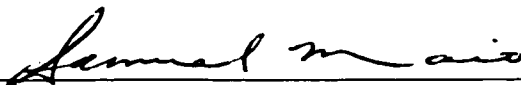
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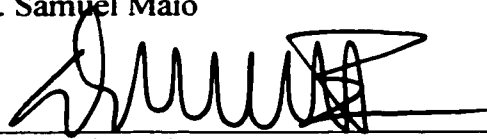
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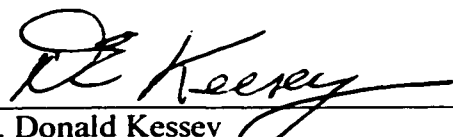
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## **ABSTRACT**

### **ALL FOR THE GOOD**

by Inga L. Silva

This thesis consists of two parts, a critical preface and a collection of short stories. The preface draws from some of the critical ideas of Samuel Maio, Viktor Shyklovsky, Leo Tolstoy, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot, and it focuses on James Joyce's novel Ulysses, in particular Joyce's use of the Odyssey motif and stream of consciousness style of narration. In Ulysses, Joyce used the Odyssey motif to create a parallel between the antique and contemporary world, and in doing so created an experience more complex allowing the reader to re-experience a day in the life of Dublin, Ireland. "All For the Good" is a collection of five short stories with the motif of Stoicism. The intention is to create a coherent means to explore characters trapped by their own perceptions in the everyday life of Silicon Valley, allowing the reader re-experience life, allowing the reader to see life the way the formalist Viktor Shyklovsky described--to see "the stone as *stony*" (Shyklovsky).

## **DEDICATION**

To my family: my parents, Jayme and Lilia Silva, who always encouraged the bookworm of the family; and to my children, Glenn Charest, Calvin Nakagawa, and Joshua Nakagawa, who have accepted the importance of writing poems and stories in their mother's life.

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## Preface

My life since entering graduate school has been a dichotomy between two worlds, the world of nursing and the world of writing. Because I chose to study literature and writing and because I am a registered nurse who works in an emergency room as a trauma charge nurse and emergency room nurse, I have found myself living between the medical world and literary world. In the course of a typical week, I have assisted in the treatment of a member of the Mexican Mafia with multiple gunshot wounds and studied the work of Richard Rodriguez. I have helped in the resuscitation of a newborn who was dying from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome and committed to memory the words of Ben Jonson's famous sonnet "My Son Ben." Then, at the end of a shift, I have wiped the blood from my shoes before making my way to the library at San Jose State University, or at the end of a school day, I have written poetry in the hospital cafeteria. Such is the dichotomy between seemingly unrelated worlds. But the two distinct worlds have been brought together for me through reading and writing.

Reading the complex work of James Joyce's Ulysses and the work of the ancient Stoics, coupled with my experiences in the emergency department, has helped me find my voice as a writer. The collection of short stories presented in this thesis use Stoicism as a motif and the important influences range from Joyce's use of structure and stream-of-consciousness narration in Ulysses, to Viktor Shklovsky's "Art as Technique" and Leo Tolstoy's "What is Art?"

First, I would like briefly to describe how I arrived at an understanding of voice. One of the difficulties I have encountered is changing from an abbreviated writing style

that is only factual and informative, as used in my nursing profession, to writing that is literary and artistic. For example, to describe a patient with a hand laceration, I would write: *24yo m c/o r hand lac, bldg controlled*, which translates to “24 year old male complains of right hand laceration which is not bleeding significantly.” As a result of being trained to write in this shorthand, facts-only style, my early writing attempts lacked a descriptive quality. My sentences were extremely short, and I could not see the need nor did I know how to describe anything in great detail. Both descriptions above depict a man with a hand laceration. The first takes a moment to read and comprehend, the second requires too much time in a busy emergency room.

Essentially, to overcome this conflict of writing styles, I struggled to learn how language works and a way to articulate that for myself. A breakthrough came for me when I was exposed to form poetry, which I feared as an undergraduate studying creative writing. Ironically, it was form poetry that helped me understand how literary language works. From studying poetry, I learned that a poet must create his or her own voice as the speaker or narrator in the poem, and I came to this understanding after reading Samuel Maio’s Creating Another Self: Voice in Modern American Personal Poetry.

Maio begins describing voice with a definition from T. S. Eliot: “Voice is a method by which the poet speaks” (qtd. in Maio 1). Maio distinguishes between “personal poetry” and “persona” in poetry. He states:

The poet creates a persona—one called “I” or by a proper noun—to act as the personal poet’s speaker, and it is this speaker’s self which is defined by the poem’s “images” of the self,” and only to the extent they are depicted in the poem. Therefore the personal poet, consciously or not, substitutes for his or her literal, historical self a literary self as voice of the poem, one that is sincere but not altogether authentic. (Maio 2)

The notion that the “self as the voice of the poem” is a voice that is “sincere but not altogether authentic” became important for me in defining myself both as a poet and prose writer. The self that I am trying to define in the short stories that follow this preface is “sincere” and yet not necessarily “authentic.” The stories are sincere in that they incorporate bits and pieces of experiences of an emergency room trauma charge nurse. They are sincere in my attempt to create a “self” that can bring together the worlds that I live in, the world of the nurse and the world of the writer. But the stories are not “authentic” in the sense that they represent the truth or real people and incidents. They are, however, authentic in that I have drawn upon my nursing experience and my education in writing to create fictional stories of personal drama.

After arriving at an understanding of voice, my next task was to understand writing as art. The impetus for understanding writing as an art came from the work of Viktor Shklovsky in his “Art as Technique.” What is the meaning of art in writing? Art redirects the experience of everyday life, allowing us to experience life by the artistic control of perception. “Art exists so that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony” (Shklovsky 12). Our perceptive effort is reduced by the familiarity with the experiences of life. We don’t see things because they are familiar. Shklovsky calls this familiarization habitualization. “Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war” (Shklovsky 12). The purpose of art is to redirect the reader’s perception of everyday life: a writer must carefully consider technique in order to control the reader’s distance from the events of everyday life.



Shklovsky's definition of the purpose of art directs my focus on technique because of its powerful control of perception. I believe that the control of perception is a primary goal of the writer, and controlling perception motivates the writer to carefully consider the form, which will establish control. For me, the short story, by definition, ideally captures a single event. The form prolongs the reader's view by making the reader see a single event closely; the reader is able "to see the stone as stony."

In addition to form and perception, what other aspects of writing define art? I turn my focus now to Leo Tolstoy's "What is Art?" Leo Tolstoy has both a moralistic and aesthetic theory of art by which he describes the origin of good and bad art. Good art comes from a religious perception: "It is by the standard of this religious perception that the feelings transmitted by art have always been appraised" (Tolstoy 407). That perception is reached by a moralistic understanding which evolves from society. Tolstoy states: "In every period of history and in every human society there exists an understanding of the meaning of life, which represents the highest level to which men of society have attained—an understanding indicating the highest good at which that society aims" (Tolstoy 406) .

Tolstoy also believes that good art is universal and not exclusive. Good art can be comprehended on a universal level; bad art is exclusive and is understood by a restricted audience. Good art has "a quality of uniting all men in one common feeling" and bad art "is exclusive and does not unite all men" (Tolstoy 418).

For the writer, a challenge emerges from Tolstoy's distinction between good and bad art. The challenge is to create fiction that is not exclusive, but "unites a quality of

common feeling.” Great works of writing promote a common feeling, feelings that endure through time. The brilliance of Shakespeare remains because of his ability to create situations relating human dilemmas faced by kings and queens and making those dilemmas have meaning to any audience of any socio-economic class of any time period. Art remains through time because of the quality of *feeling* relayed through the writing. The short story is an ideal form to create Tolstoy’s idea of good art by taking an incident or incidents which reveal human character flaws, and making them have meaning to any reader of any time period. A writer must remember that the events relayed in a short story may reflect life as it is during that time period, but character traits should be universal. In the play King Lear, the king has a tragic flaw; he has excessive pride that makes him blind to the truth; his excessive pride precipitates a chain of events that ends in far reaching tragedy. His foolish pride is a character trait that the reader can easily identify as a universal character flaw.

In my thesis, the critical definitions of art by Tolstoy and Shklovsky focus my attention on two important aspects of art: perception and universality. Good writing begins on the personal level, but moves beyond the personal level to the reader. The short story must make the reader identify with the character in some significant way in order to re-experience life.

If we think of James Joyce’s novel Ulysses in relation to this idea of re-experiencing life, we see Joyce’s structuring of the novel helps the reader re-experience life as the reader travels with Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus one day in the city of Dublin, Ireland. Joyce creates situations in which the reader experiences the day through

Joyce's strong artistic control of perception by his motif of The Odyssey by Homer. The motif illustrates his mastery of form. The reader's perception is controlled with techniques such as narrative, catechism, monologue, and even dialectic. The travels mimic the travels of Odysseus and his son Telemakhos in The Odyssey. Using the motif of The Odyssey, Joyce places his text in literary history, and by Tolstoy's definition, "renders accessible to men of the latest generations all the feelings experienced by their predecessors and also those felt by their best and foremost contemporaries" (Tolstoy 406). To understand Ulysses, the reader must understand The Odyssey. The motif places the work in a framework of literary history with its distinct connection with The Odyssey and the framework controls the reader's perception.

The parallel structuring of Leopold Bloom and Stephan Dedalus with the hero Odysseus and Telemakhos creates the motif that describes Bloom and Dedalus as traveling and encountering many personal trials and tribulations the way Odysseus and Telemakhos did in The Odyssey. Sometimes Bloom and Dedalus are mocking Odysseus' journey because of the difference in the struggle. The struggles of Bloom and Dedalus when compared to Odysseus and Telemakhos seem comic and much less heroic. The motif of The Odyssey assists the writer in creating universality with past and present times, and the motif creates an aesthetic device that holds the novel together. Ulysses would be difficult to understand without the motif of The Odyssey to guide the reader. I believe that Joyce used The Odyssey motif to create a unique perception which makes the reader see the stone as *stony*. In reality nothing extraordinary happens in Ulysses, but the

reader walks and sees the day slowly, and the reader identifies with the characters in some way.

Joyce's parallel structure not only controls perception but it makes the text more available for the reader. Harry Blamires states in his work, The New Bloomsday Book: A Guide through Ulysses, that the structure gave a setting for the novel to take place. He states: It "provided Joyce with a convenient framework, and it provides his critics and readers with a convenient nomenclature" (Blamires ix). Although chapters have no titles, if the reader knows chapter eleven is related to "Sirens" in The Odyssey, the reader will understand the musical aspects of the chapter by thinking of the luring songs of the sirens. There is not a one-to-one correspondence, but there is a sense of the comic or mockery, which helps place the novel as a mock epic.

I found this interesting because it illustrates what T.S. Eliot describes in his famous essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," that Joyce's writing has "technical excellence" which can be seen in Joyce's structuring and ordering process, his nomenclature, his exquisite control of form.

Joyce's structuring of form has drawn me back continually to his work. After my first encounter with Joyce's novel as an undergraduate, I found myself returning over and over again to his writing. T. S. Eliot, in his 1923 article titled "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," regarded Ulysses as "the most important expression which the present age has found; it is a book to which we are all indebted, and from which none of us can escape" (Eliot, Ulysses, 480). As a writer, I cannot think of single work that has taught me more.

I wanted to know how and why Joyce structured Ulysses the way he did. Where did the stream-of-consciousness technique originate? In the chapter titled “The Background of Ulysses” from Richard Ellmann’s biography of Joyce, it is evident that Joyce planned the novel over a long period of time. “Joyce had been preparing to write Ulysses since 1907. It grew steadily more ambitious in scope and method, and represented a sudden outflinging of all he had learned as a writer up to 1914” (Ellmann 358). Joyce also planned to make his novel parallel with The Odyssey long before the work really began to take shape. An early letter to his brother written on June 16, 1915, a date that is coincidental to us now, revealed that Joyce had planned the parallel structure with The Odyssey to have twenty-two episodes, which was eventually reduced to eighteen. The plan for the novel’s structure came early, and its purpose was to create an epic. Joyce was accumulating many parallels with the earlier work. Ellmann describes some of the parallels with earlier literary history:

He turned this Odyssean adventure into Bloom’s misadventure in volunteering an unconscious tip about the prospects of a dark horse in the races. (Bloom is himself transformed into a horse in the Circe episode). Joyce’s high spirits made him see many parallels of this kind: in the Cyclops episode, as Stuart Gilbert notices, the cigar Bloom keeps brandishing in front of the citizen is like the spear Ulysses uses to blind the Cyclops; the post-Homeric legend tells how Ulysses stole the Phallus Athena, and in Joyce’s book Bloom takes an erotic profane look at the goddess in the National Museum. The many light-hearted cross-references of this kind have lent support to the idea that Ulysses is a great joke on Homer, but jokes are not necessarily so simple, and these have double aim. The first aim is the mock-heroic. This demonstrates that the world of cigars is devoid of heroism only to those who don’t understand Ulysses’ spear was merely a sharpened stick, as homely an instrument in its way, and that Bloom can demonstrate the qualities of man by word of mouth as effectively as Ulysses by thrust of spear. (Ellmann 360)

Joyce's purpose was to describe the epic ideal and universal values but in his own story about Ireland.

In addition to Ellmann's analysis, Daniel R. Schwarz in his Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism: James Joyce's The Dead basically analyzes Joyce's motives and comes to a similar conclusion as Ellmann. Schwarz describes Joyce's intentions:

Joyce chose literary history and historical sources that present what he believed to be the central recurring issues that appear within each cycle that illustrate the universal values on which man's survival depends.[. . .] But he also choose The Odyssey as a model because it was the epic that stresses how an individual uses his intelligence, judgement, and inner strength to overcome obstacles and, finally, to accomplish his goal. (Schwarz 15)

The structure also makes us examine the content in a comparative form. Unlike Odysseus and Telemakhos, Bloom and Dedalus fight with their minds rather than spears. The narrative styles also add to the comparative form, rendering the episodes of the novel like the episodes in The Odyssey. Joyce's use of the different styles also adds to his notion of the parallax. A parallax is "a mathematical term that describes how an object is perceived for many different places" (Schwarz 15). Joyce adapts this idea of the parallax by the writing in different styles of narrative, thereby redefining not only the novel but also the epic too, creating a hero who is close to home and struggles with the day to day drudgery of daily life. Leopold Bloom does not end up in a place much different from where he started but after the journey of the narrative we do not see him in quite the same way.

Though we can say that a parallel makes us see Leopold Bloom differently because of the parallax created by the various narrative styles, we cannot say that it explains everything. Ulysses is a book in its own right. Harry Blamires' book, The New

Bloomsday Book: A Guide through Ulysses, reminds us that “Joyce’s symbolism cannot be explained mechanically in terms of one-for-one parallels, for his correspondences are neither exclusive nor continuously persistent. Nevertheless certain correspondences reoccur throughout Ulysses, establishing themselves firmly” (Blamire 3). According to T. S. Eliot, “In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him.[. . .] It is simply a way of controlling, ordering, giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (Eliot, Ulysses 483).

In addition to the main discussion of structure, it is important to note that the initial publication of the novel may possibly have some bearing on the novel’s structure too. Ulysses was initially published as a serialized work in the American Journal from 1918 to 1920, later published as a book in Paris in 1922, and then published by Random House in 1934 in the United States (Schwarz 12).

To sum it up, the structuring of Ulysses involved parallels, parallaxes, and epic tradition to create a unique style of novel that had never been written before using human nature as its hero and the epic as its setting.

Besides Joyce’s structuring of Ulysses, I was interested in Joyce’s multiple prose styles which again illustrate “technical excellence.” In many ways, James Joyce’s prose in Ulysses and Finnegan’s Wake reminds me of poetry, especially, if I think of Joyce’s writing in relation to Ezra Pound’s meaning of literature and poetry. Ezra Pound in his ABC of Reading describes literature as “language charged with meaning [. . .] (28);

great literature is language charged with meaning to the utmost degree [. . .] (28); an epic is a poem including history” (Pound 46). Joyce charges his words with meaning also by his style of narrative using many techniques—stream-of-consciousness, dialectic, catechism. Joyce described his technique in his earlier work in terms of art, and his structuring in terms of mode. In Portrait of an Artist, Joyce states:

Art divides itself into three forms from one to the next. These forms are: the lyrical form, the form where in the artist presents his image in immediate relation to himself; the epical form, the form wherein he presents his image in immediate relation to others [. . .] The lyrical form is in fact the simplest verbal gesture of an instant of emotion [. . .] He who utters it is more conscious of the instant of emotion than of himself as feeling the emotion. The simplest epical form longs and broods upon himself and from others. The narrative is no longer purely personal. The personality of the artist passes not the narrative itself and from others. The narrative is no longer purely personal. The personality of the artist passes into the narrative itself like a vital sea [. . .] The dramatic form is reached when the vitality which has flowed and eddied round each person fills every person with such vital force that he or she assumes a proper and intangible esthetic life. The personality of the artist, at first a cry or cadence or a mood and then a fluid and lambent narrative, finally redefines itself out of existence, impersonalizes itself, so to speak. The esthetic image in the dramatic form is life purified in and reprojected from the human imagination. (qtd. in Schwarz 17)

An example of the Lyrical Mode is found in the last paragraph of “The Dead.”

A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead. (qtd. in Schwarz 19)

The Epical Mode can be seen in any schematic chart of Ulysses:



Table 1

The Epical Mode in Ulysses

<b>Chapter Title</b>	<b>Scene</b>	<b>Technique</b>
Telemackhos	The Tower	Narrative
Nestor	The School	Catechism
Proteus	The Strand	Monologue
Calypso	The House	Narrative
Lotus-Eaters	The Bath	Narcissism
Hades	The Graveyard	Incubism
Aeolus	The Newspaper	Enthymemic
Lestrygonians	The Lunch	Peristaltic
Scylla and Charybdis	The Library	Dialectic
Wandering Rocks	The Streets	Labyrinth
Sirens	The Concert Room	Fuga per canonem
Cyclops	The Tavern	Gigantism
Nausicaa	The Rocks	Atumescence, detumescence
Oxen of the Sun	The Hospital	Embryonic development
Circe	The Brothel	Hallucination
Eumaeus	The Shelter	Navigation
Ithaca	Science	Catechism
Penelope	The bed	Monologue

Source: Stuart Gilbert, "The Rhythm of Ulysses." James Joyce's Ulysses. New York:

Vintage, 1955. 30

<sup>a</sup>This table is only a partial representation of the table in Gilbert's text.

Besides the schematic chart that gives it the epic qualities, Joyce used the dramatic mode illustrated by the following from the chapter referred to as "Oxen of the Sun."

BELLA My word! I'm all of a mucksweat.

(She glances around her at the couples. Then her eyes rest on Bloom with hard insistence. Her lace fan winnows wind towards her heated face, neck and embonpoint. Her falcon eyes glitter.)

THE FAN (Flirting quickly, then slowly.) Married, I see.

BLOOM Yes... Partly, I have mislaid .

Stream-of-consciousness appears in much of the novel, but in the chapter known as “Penelope” it is most memorable:

Yes because he never did a thing like that before as ask to get his breakfast in bed with a couple of eggs since the city arms hotel when he used to be pretending to be laid up with a sick voice doing his highness to make himself interesting to that old faggot Mrs Riordan that he thought he had a great leg of and she never left us a farthing all for masses for herself and her soul greatest miser ever was actually afraid to lay out 4d for her methyated spirit. (Ulysses 738)

Stream-of-consciousness is to me the most interesting of all the styles that Joyce used. The term originated from a phrase used by William James in his Principles of Psychology and has been described in different ways; the most assessable is M. H. Abrams’s definition in A Glossary of Terms:

Stream-of-consciousness is a term used to characterize the unbroken flow of thought and awareness in the waking mind; it has now been adapted to describe a narrative method in modern fiction. [. . .] Some critics use stream-of-consciousness to describe or to represent the overall state and process of the conscious character. “Interior monologue” can then be reserved to denote specifically the technique that under takes to reproduce the course and rhythm of consciousness just as it occurs in a character’s mind, with no (or at any rate, minimal intervention by the author as guide or commentator, and without tidying the vagaries of the mental process into grammatical sentences or into a logical narrative order. The interior monologue, in its radical form, is sometimes described as the exact reproduction of consciousness; but since sense perceptions, feelings, and some aspects of thought itself are nonverbal, it is clear that the author must convert these into some kind of verbal equivalent, and much of this conversion is a matter of narrative convention rather than of unedited, point-by point reproduction. (Abrams 164)

For myself, I define stream-of-consciousness as a written representation of non-verbal thoughts that depict what a character is really thinking. Joyce mastered the technique, but he did not invent it. Ellmann’s biography of Joyce notes that Joyce credits

his learning the stream of conscious technique to the reading of Edouard Dujardin's novel Les Lauries sont Coupes. Edward Budgen notes that Joyce told him, "I try to give the unspoken, unacted thoughts of people in the way they occur" (qtd. in Steinberg 246). Djuna Barnes notes that Joyce said, "I have recorded, simultaneously, what a man says, sees, thinks, and what such seeing thinking, saying does to what you Freudians call the stream-of-consciousness" (qtd. in Steinberg 246). Joyce's contemporaries, such as Virginia Woolf, used stream-of-consciousness in a similar manner. Woolf stated that the modern novelist needs to "examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad of impressions--trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides that come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old" (qtd. in Steinberg 247).

In The Stream of Consciousness and Beyond, Erin R. Steinberg discusses the definition of stream-of-consciousness at length. He describes Alfred Korzybski's definition of prespeech levels of consciousness in terms of four levels of abstraction: "(1) the event, or scientific object, or the submicroscopic physico-chemical processes, (2) the ordinary object manufactured from the event by our lower nervous centres, (3) the psychological centres, and (4) the verbal definition of the term" (qtd. in Steinberg 248).

The levels of interest for my study are the third and fourth, the "psychological centers" and the "verbal definition of the term." Steinberg states that "it is at these levels that one finds psychological images, sensations, and perceptions." He states Joyce uses this technique in the "Proteus" and "Lestrygonians" chapters, but that in the "Penelope"

chapter Joyce is doing something different. Molly is represented by the fourth, or verbal level. He describes this as an interior monologue or “silent soliloquy” (Steinberg 249). In other words, the writing is not as abstract in the Molly Bloom soliloquy as earlier chapters. He believes it is important to distinguish the technique since it differs from earlier chapters, and many terms are used indiscriminately, which causes critical confusion. He finishes his chapter stating that Joyce did not create an exact replica of thought, and Joyce distinguished the different thoughts of the different characters. “And the fact that from the stream-of-consciousness of Stephen and Bloom and from the internal monologue of Molly the reader sees three distinctly different personalities is ample evidence that while Joyce’s technique may give the appearance of confusion (an appearance carefully cultivated by the author, it should be noted), it is actually highly selective and very carefully organized” (Steinberg 256).

It is evident that Joyce’s use of stream-of-consciousness or silent soliloquy is sophisticated. I found it interesting for several reasons. In the medical world, one must reserve judgment and comment on many aspects of the patients one encounters in the line of duty or work, and this of course comes from necessity; it comes from maintaining respect. The young girl who gives birth to a term baby even though she denies pregnancy is difficult to believe. The refraining from judgment and comment is no easy task. In the literary world, thoughts and actions can be quite interesting and even humorous. I wanted to experiment with the device in some of my stories. I wanted to write some stories using the device to describe the character’s psyche.

In addition to the stream-of-consciousness device, I wanted to use the motif of Stoicism. I became interested in Stoicism when I realized that many of its doctrines are ingrained in our society, ingrained in the way we think, act and speak. Sayings such as “Grin and bear it” or “It’s all for the good” describe some of the ways we think today related to Stoicism. Proper conduct for everyday living and much of what is considered to be proper military or police deportment has its beginnings in Stoicism.

According to William E. Mann’s introduction to “Epictetus” (a Stoic) in Classics in Western Philosophy, Stoicism is a philosophical movement that developed over five hundred years from 300 BC to 180 AD (Mann 335). As a philosophical doctrine it did not change much in content but did change drastically in emphasis. “The early Stoics had placed equal emphasis on Logic, Physics, and Ethics, but the Roman Stoics were concerned almost exclusively with the ethical and political aspects of Stoicism” (Mann 335). The Stoics like to view the world from a macrocosm-microcosm perspective. This perspective basically established four principles of Stoic ethics:

First, since the source of human intelligence is a natural material element, fire, and since intelligence is the hallmark of what it is to be human, it followed for the Stoics that a person is a part of the natural physical universe, and not something over and above it. [. . .] Second, if the universe itself is governed by certain laws and if a person is a microcosm of the universe, then it follows that a person is subject to the same laws as those who govern it.[. . .]Third, inasmuch as a person is a microcosm of an inherently rational world, a person ought to live life in perfect conformity with nature, that is, a life in which reason dominates a person’s actions and passions.[. . .]Finally, the Stoics’ insistence on the law-governed nature of the universe committed them to determinism, the thesis that everything that happens is the outcome of the operation of unchangeable and all-pervasive laws. (Mann 335-6)

For my study of Stoicism, I turned to the accessible description of Stoicism in the work of F.H. Sandbach, The Stoics, which describes the major principles of Stoicism in a

condensed form and a brief history of its development. The third chapter “The System: Ethics” was the most useful for my study. Sandbach’s description of virtue gave my writing a focus. According to Sandbach’s interpretation of Stoic philosophy, Virtue is a state in which a man does what is right; hence a virtuous man is a man who always does what is right. In contrast to virtue or symmetrically opposed to virtue is something that is bad or kakon and should be confined to something considered to be morally imperfect (28).

For the Stoics the issues of good and bad were straightforward. A good man is a virtuous man; a bad man is an immoral man. The task in life is to be good and virtuous. But then how does a man become good or virtuous? Sandbach states: “Throughout the history of Stoicism this is a key-point and one perhaps of increasing importance. A man’s excellence or virtue—the Greek word aretê covers both—does not depend on his success in obtaining anything in the external world, it depends entirely on his having the right attitude towards those things” (Sandbach 29). A man becomes successful by his attitude, the right attitude.

Besides the Stoics belief about virtue and attitude, the Stoics also connected nature with God. In his chapter “The System: Natural Science,” Sandbach describes what the Stoics believed about God, reason, and nature: They believed they could show that the whole world (i.e., the universe) was the planned and providential work of God, that human reason if correct must think in the same way as the divine reason, and that man should therefore accept willingly all that happens (Sandbach 69). God and man are

one if man is acting reasonably, and even if situations occur that are difficult, man must accept there is divine reason for such occurrences.

I became interested in Sandbach's book because, when situations arise that are terrible and cannot easily be explained I wonder if it is part of a divine plan or fate. I believe that many of us who work in emergency type work see the results of bad conduct, yet we struggle with good conduct ourselves. I wonder if we are part of a microcosm that represents the problems in American cities. Stoicism is applicable because we grasp the ideals of Stoic principles to try and discipline ourselves to bring order out of chaos to make sense of the world.

I chose the Stoicism motif because I felt that it was structurally loose enough to hold five different stories together, while still maintaining structure. It is important to note though that many aspects of Stoicism described here may be considered similar to aspects of other philosophies namely Existentialism, Utilitarianism, and Determinism. My intention for using Stoicism was primarily as a literary device and technique to order the stories and to connect present to past events. Joyce's structuring of Ulysses was a sophisticated and elaborate model that held the novel together. It was not my intention to mimic Joyce but only to use his work as a beginning point to understand motif. My collection of short stories uses the motif of Stoicism loosely, but I wanted each story to stand as a separate piece of the whole.

In the first story, titled "All For the Good," Frank Milano stands on his porch much like Zeno the first Stoic stood on the "Stoa Poikile" or "Painted Colonnade"

speaking to listeners (Sandbach 20). Frank is meditating on the state of his affairs as revealed by his stream-of-consciousness.

“Fate,” the second story deals with the inner struggles of Cooper who is, in a sense, the archetype of good stoic behavior. Cooper is a police officer who serves his family and community, but he cannot comprehend the abstract until he is confronted with a situation that is irrational and abstract in reality.

In “Wisteria,” Juliana Zapata struggles with her conscience Juliana has good conduct by Stoic standards, yet she struggles inside because doing what is right means using herself as a weapon. This story uses lyrical prose and was experimental for me as a writer.

“Jaded” takes on the epistolary format describing the comic situation of Ed Gonzalez, who finds himself in a dilemma when he tries to do what is right for his friend, wife and community. But money comes first and comically causes Ed to get himself in all kinds of predicaments because he wants to save a buck.

The last story of the collection is “The White Down Comforter,” which narrates a day in the life of a woman, Miriam, who wonders if the world is governed by the Stoic ideal that “the world is ordered throughout by the will of God, and that all that happens is part of a single plan” (Sandbach 35).

Each story represents a different notion or ideal that is unconsciously present in the values and morals we may question but ultimately live by as a means to try and make sense of our chaotic worlds.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In writing this collect of short stories, I have drawn upon many resources that helped me create a framework for the motif, structure, and characters in my stories. The content of my stories were in inspired by my experience as an emergency room trauma charge nurse and from experiences of fellow workers in emergency services—nurses, doctors, patients, police, and others who have encountered the difficulties of this type of work. The stories are entirely fictional. Any connection to reality is purely coincidental.

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## All For The Good

*The assaults of adversity do not weaken the spirit of a brave man.*

-- Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Moral Essays*

On the last day of his sick leave, sitting outside on his porch in the cold March air, Frank Milano flexed and extended the fingers of his numb right hand causing a tingling sensation to run into his finger-tips. The feeling was coming back. It was his gun hand, and he had injured the tendon and nerve by accident. Though he had regained full function of his hand, the doctor said that only time would determine if the nerve would return to its previous state. So for now, he had to live and work with a numb right hand, a hand he had injured while on duty, a hand that had no feeling. Except for occasional visits to his son and his wife, Frank mostly sat on his porch smoking and contemplating the state of his affairs. Frank wondered: Was it all for the good?

He watched the ashes blow off the end of his cigarette into the wind, the red embers blowing out quickly. The porch was a good place to watch nature turn with the seasons. He hoped his landlady wouldn't come out and start chatting. She talked incessantly, and he wanted to be alone. Tonight he would be back on duty, back in a world of good and evil, back in a world that he handled by existing in a state of quiet solitude or raging adrenaline.

The landlady opened the door to the main house and walked outside with her annoying scuffing slippers. Frank put his cigarette out and walked back into his apartment. She was going to remind him about the towel, the towel he had nailed on his window, the towel he had promised to remove and replace with curtains. It was nailed to

the window frame. A breeze flapped it up and down revealing the side that faced the driveway; it had faded. It was threatening to fall off any moment. Frank watched it float up and then snap down; he hated the towel, but he didn't really hate it enough to change it. Eleanor had given him the pair of towels when they had separated. The other towel of the pair he had used the night he lacerated his hand, the night the tendon and nerve had been severed on a piece of glass from a motor vehicle accident. The towel reminded him of the state of his affairs, things that were supposed to be temporary had remained in a long temporary state. Every time he thought of buying something for his apartment, Eleanor slipped into his thoughts, Eleanor whom he loved, whom he had hurt by moving out of their house shortly after his partner Jose died. Frank knew he was the problem. She didn't know she was pregnant then, and Frank felt terrible after he found out, but there wasn't another woman. Some of his friends thought he was getting a little "side action," but that wasn't the situation. Frank told Eleanor there wasn't anyone else; that was the truth. Frank didn't judge the men who had side affairs or who flirted excessively. Many of the men on the force had "side affairs" when they first joined the force, but no one person could fill the emptiness, the void of day-to-day life in the midst of crime and death and atrocity. No woman could help you escape the pain of the soul in police work.

Frank flipped through the pages of a K-Mart ad searching for a curtain sale. He wanted to get the landlady off his back. Just because he bought curtains didn't mean that he and Eleanor would get a divorce. Frank believed that it was better to have no affection than to have moderate affection. It was better to give your all than to give just a little. The apartment was a decent place to live while he figured out what he was going to do.

Maybe he would go see “the kid,” the kid who caused a smile to come to Frank’s face.

The kid had fine blond hair and clear trusting blue eyes, but the kid didn’t have much personality, and in fact, all the baby did was cry for Eleanor’s breast. Frank laughed when he thought of his son and Eleanor snuggled together—that was beauty. Sometimes he felt incredible guilt because Eleanor seemed so tired all the time. Frank had offered to move back in.

“No. When you come back, Frank, I want you to come back because you love me and you want to be here—to really be here in body and in mind.”

There was the problem: Frank felt indifferent to pleasure and pain: Frank was indifferent to life. Life was duty and the attainment of perfection. Eleanor couldn’t handle this part of Frank.

“I can deal with anger or sadness or anything, but I cannot deal with indifference.” Maybe he would go back and try to open his heart and soul to Eleanor, but what was the use of all this emotional talking things out? He called it psycho-babble and he didn’t believe in any of it. Frank accepted life the way it was. He believed in fate.

The damn Silicon Valley Police Department had done this to him with Frank’s exposure to abused children, beaten wives, murdered men and women, suicides of all ages. None of it ever changed, but Frank knew that he was destined to be a cop and that he was the military type of man. At first it bothered him, but he had learned to separate himself from his feelings. The standard police stoicism required an emotional distance for bending over the dead. Eleanor was patient because she thought what Frank was

attempting to work through was the loss of Jose, Jose and his love for donuts and coffee and “perks.”

They sat in Winchell’s Donuts as they had any other night, sipping coffee, bending over the early edition of the “San Jose Murky News” as they called it. Because of Jose’s love of donuts Jose’s belly hung over his belt and touched the counter when he sat down and made his bullet proof vest feel too tight to wear and feel comfortable. Frank would always tease him, “Jose, the donuts are going to kill you. They are like lead bullets in your heart.”

Frank listened to the radio: “211 in progress at King’s Liquor Store.” Frank and Jose threw the donuts down, flew out the door, and made a perfect U-turn of rubber in the middle of the street in their black and white. “A 211 in progress at King and Story. Two suspects approximately twenty-five years old, armed and dangerous. Suspect was seen entering the liquor store carrying Magnum 357. Owner of the store may have been shot. Called in by a female at phone booth around the corner.” Jose jumped out of his black and white and began to draw his gun out of the holster just as the first suspect ran out of the store. The suspect held a gun up and shot Jose smack in the middle of his chest. The moments that followed were a blur. Frank shot back. More B & W’s showed up. The suspect died in his car, and that’s when Frank realized Jose was down. In just a few moments, they had gone from sharing donuts to sharing the last few minutes of life.

K-Mart was part of Frank’s regular beat. The parking lot wasn’t very full at nine-thirty in the morning. Old ladies and women with small children were lined up by the outside of the door waiting to hunt down bargains. Frank felt pathetic. What was he

doing here buying a pair of curtains? He should leave, but he didn't want to have to deal with the landlord breathing down his neck because of the ugly red towel. Buying curtains was woman's work. His wife always bought the curtains, and before that his mother did. Frank thought of Jose's wife and tried to put her out of his thoughts. He didn't want to think of what it must be like for her day after day with the children. A lady in line nudged Frank accidentally, and then she scurried through the door. Frank's hand immediately went for his gun under his jacket, a reflex action.

There were curtains in varying colors and prints. What size? Frank picked up package after package and read the labels. He thought about the colors and nothing made sense. The same woman who nudged him at the door pushed her cart by with a large blue plastic garbage can in her cart. That's when he noticed her skin had a yellowish tint and her face was pale.

"Don't know anything about curtains. Do you?" she said.

"No. I'm trying to get my landlady off my back."

"How big is your window?"

"I don't know. I think about four feet high and two feet wide."

"Is your window bigger than those or smaller," she pointed to the curtains on display.

"I think those would fit."

She pulled out a package of curtains.

"Here, you look like the neat black and white pin stripe type."



“I do, huh?” Frank laughed. Sometimes people told him they knew he was a cop by the way he walked and talked and dressed.

“Cash or check?”

“Cash.” Frank watched the woman with the pale skin count the money into the clerk’s hands. Her hand shook slightly.

A big gust of March wind with all its bitterness blew around the parking lot as Frank walked to his car. The lady with the garbage can chased the can down the driveway with a sad expression as she ran behind it. Quickly Frank put his large booted foot out and stopped the noisy empty garbage can.

“Let me put it in the car for you.” His arm rubbed against her arm which had a vibration.

“I have a shunt. I am a dialysis patient. My kidneys don’t work.”

Frank smiled at her and thought of how lucky he was to be healthy.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” And Frank’s hand tingled. It would be good to be back at work. Sometimes he was able to do things to help others. That was the part of the work that made him go back.

He remembered the night he cut himself. An accident on Blossom and Snell. A routine call. He stopped and sent one driver with a cut on her lip to the hospital while the other driver waited for a tow truck. When the tow truck came, Frank walked over to the driver’s side to make sure the car was in neutral. That’s when it happened; that’s when a large sliver of glass like an icicle slit his finger open, the large gapping wound bleeding

all over until he grabbed the red towel. Frank thought of the woman with the shunt. He was lucky. She was probably the same age as him, but she looked very sick.

He'd forgotten how good it felt to be in a squad car. Driving up and down the streets, talking to his buddies about the Warriors, and wearing his uniform again. There was something reassuring about having a purpose. At least tonight there were no DUI's in San Jose. He hated chasing intoxicated drivers on wet pavement. He needed to get back into the rhythm of working again--maybe it would help him make some decisions about his life. The rain was a drizzle, a wet annoying drizzle, the kind of rain that left everything slippery and wet and dirty. No drought this year.

The shift was almost over, but the radio blared.

"1055 in Willow Glen off Bird."

Frank drove up on the driveway. A vaguely familiar station wagon was parked on the other side. Yellow plastic crime scene tape blocked intruders.

Frank lit a cigarette. It was something he learned a long time ago. Sometimes the bodies smelled or the blood smell got to him. Mostly what bothered him was when they died with their eyes open.

"The body is in the bedroom to the right."

"What was it?"

"1055."

"Blasted in the head."

"No. It's pretty weird. The lady is a dialysis patient. On Friday they told her she couldn't get a kidney because she had too many chronic medical problems. She opened

the clips to her shunt and bled into a garbage can. Daughter found her. It was really clean. She left a note.”

Frank shuddered. He peeked in the spotless room. Across the bed a woman was stretched out in a clean white nightgown her arm extended over a blue garbage can. The color of her hand was the color of the bloodless, the dead. Her face was as white as the sheet, and her eyes were closed. For a moment he didn't recognize her. It was the woman from K-Mart, the woman he had helped in the parking lot. He felt the uneasiness hit him like a bullet on the vest, a bullet that doesn't kill you but jolts you into a different reality, a bullet that leaves a pain on your chest you cannot describe. He leaned against the wall for a moment then walked into the other room. The daughter was crying; her cries echoed through the house; her cries penetrated his thoughts. The dead woman was only forty years old. He bit his lip and put his hand on the shoulder of the daughter. He thought of the pinstriped curtains hanging in his apartment. He thought of how her arm had vibrated when he had accidentally touched her shunt. The rest was ugly.

The shift was over. Morning light appeared in the dark bleak skies. What had started as a cloudless night had ended in a dark bleak rain, the kind of rain that had sharp almost glass-like edges. He headed back to his apartment, gripping the wheel tightly with his numb hand. He thought of a line from a poem he'd read by Auden many years ago about how history was made by the criminal in us and goodness was timeless. He began to drive toward Eleanor's house, toward “the kid,” toward the thing he knew was good.

## Fate

Running late for the briefing, Cooper glanced at his watch. He had not changed from his dress watch to his work watch; he was wearing the watch with the distorted face. Milo, Cooper's son, had given it to him for Father's Day. Though Cooper didn't like the watch, he felt compelled to wear it, especially today, because he would visit an art show in the mall featuring the work of Milo's art class.

It was difficult to tell time using his son's watch, the face of which was a miniature of the Salvador Dali painting, "The Persistence of Memory." Right now, the minute hand was close to the bare dead tree, and the hour hand was pointing to the dead, fetal, horse-like creature on the barren horizon-less landscape.

Milo was very fond of the artwork of Salvador Dali ever since a visit to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, which he thoroughly enjoyed. For Cooper, it was a chore, grudgingly shuffling from room to room, staring at paintings that were only colors, gazing at statues that didn't make sense, or observing some old chair from the sixties that was supposed to be art. Milo, on the other hand, felt differently. He vigorously marched from gallery to gallery, mesmerized by the use of color, entranced by the contours of statues, and laughing at the weird old chairs from earlier eras.

When Cooper gazed at the Dali picture with its barren bleak landscape with floppy watches and bugs, he was reminded of nightmares; the kind that came from his police work, nightmares of eerie light that seemed to drift into infinity. Cooper liked pictures of reality, a reality that made sense, a reality that contrasted with Milo's. Milo loved the Abstract, the lack of the concrete images that left room for inherent emotion

and demand for interpretation. After Milo had read the description on the card beside the painting describing Dali's work as a "colossal world with disturbing tranquility that represented the irrationality of reality," Milo quoted the description over and over, arguing, then questioning Cooper about its meaning.

"Dad, you just don't see the world the way Salvador and I do. The world is colossal, and reality is but a dream, good or bad. The picture's not a nightmare, it's a picture about what we don't understand; it tries to make us feel it. But Dad, what does an 'irrational reality' mean?"

"I don't know, son. I wish I did, but you know I don't understand this kind of art. I don't know what it really means or how I am supposed to think or feel."

"You don't have any idea at all, Dad?"

"No, not a clue."

Cooper tried to define irrational reality to Milo using examples from his fifteen years on the police force but none of them made sense.

"I think reality is about things that actually happen, and irrational means something that doesn't make sense; but when you put them together, I don't know what it means." Cooper said. Cooper was glad when that conversation was over.

Even though he was studying for the sergeant's exam for a promotion that would allow him to make more money for Milo's college education, he wasn't thrilled with Milo's desire to pursue the study of art. More than a few times they'd had intense discussions about that choice of study, going round and round in circles, without beginning or end, over and over the same argument.

“How are you going to support yourself as an artist, Milo? I don’t have anything against art, but you have to be realistic.”

Milo would say: “I want to be famous like Salvador Dali and make pictures that make people think and feel.”

At moments that were especially exasperating, Cooper would tell his wife, “Here I am, a cop. I spend my life chasing the dark side of humanity to support my son and give him a good education. And for what? So my son can paint pictures of dead horses and flies on clocks? Don’t get me wrong, I have nothing against art or any of those kinds of professions, but out of all the sons I could have, why did my son have to want to be a painter? Of what use is art? It’s not practical. It doesn’t put food on the table.”

“Take it easy,” his wife would say, “he could still change his mind. You know he doesn’t hear you because that’s the way he is; it’s the nature of the child to rebel.”

Cooper replied, “With any luck, fate will have it that he become the next Dali, and I’ll be glad he didn’t listen.”

The slow moving of time began with the radio murmuring the day’s atrocities: a missing baby, a five-car pile-up on highway 101, a bank robbery in Almaden, a felony escape from Silicon Valley General Hospital, a gang shooting on the west side. The radio volume was too loud so Cooper turned it down. Fifteen years of listening to the low murmur of the radio had taught him to think and listen.

Cooper could wind-up and wind-down; he could go from zero to sixty miles an hour or from sixty to zero, depending on what the time called for. Right now he was

headed for his beat, hoping to find a quiet time to study the sergeant's manual. The exam was scheduled for next month.

Cooper's beat--located between an area of high crime and gang wars and an area of upper middle class and good schools--wasn't too bad. He didn't mind the problems of the working middle class or almost middle class people, struggling to survive. There were a few car thefts, an occasional problem teenage driver, and some drug addicts that kept him busy; but mostly, there were the small robberies--radio's stolen from cars, bikes stolen from front yards, and cars involved in fender-benders. They were the kind of crimes that didn't demand too much of him emotionally; and besides, he'd spent enough time driving on patrol that nothing really surprised him anymore. His reactions were rational, and without emotion.

Cooper had many friends who lived in the area of his beat. The Mexican lady, Maria Lopez, who owned the taqueria, was his favorite. Maria always tried to give Cooper free burritos, but he wouldn't take them. Felix, her husband, and loving father to their six children, had died from AIDS contracted from a blood transfusion after surgery.

The Lopez family lived in a two-bedroom townhouse like sardines in a sardine can, bunkbeds tightly crammed in the rooms, clothes piled up everywhere, with paths for maneuvering leading throughout the small house. But though the place was small, there was more love in that home than Cooper had seen in spacious, wealthy homes. A nice home wasn't everything, Cooper surmised. Felix had more love for his children than anyone Cooper knew. In fact, Felix had made such an impression on him that Cooper felt knowing Felix had made him a better father as a result. Felix always talked to his

children when they got home from school. Though he couldn't help them with their homework, he made them sit in front of him and do it while his wife ran the taqueria.

Cooper missed stopping by there during his shift, even though it had been hard the last few weeks because of death lingering in the air. He could stop by to see the children—Maria, Fernando, Jose', Dolores, Jesus, and "Little Felix." Cooper's wife had given him some Easter baskets for the children, but he didn't have them with him tonight.

Sometimes Cooper wished that he and his wife had more children. Cooper loved little Dolores who liked to sit on his lap and touch his badge. She made him feel good about himself without knowing why. He had always wanted a daughter, but they couldn't have any more children because his wife had been told not to.

The first call was a nothing call. Another Honda broken into, the radio gone, broken glass all over the street. The owner expected nothing. Cooper pulled up in front of the house, thoughtfully examining the car. There really wasn't much he could do. He gave the woman the small blue card with the case number for her insurance, comforted her with the usual condolences, and climbed back in his car.

There was a baseball game going on down the street. He slowed down for a few minutes to see if he knew anyone. Parents were screaming, "Batter! Batter! Batter!" He remembered those days, sitting on the benches or coaching the small children. He remembered the meetings with the other parents, watching their children together. His son had lost interest after junior high school; preferring art to sports. Felix's death was helping Cooper accept Milo's choice of study. Felix would say in Spanish: "One is only here from this point to that point. We only have the middle."



The second call was at the grocery store. An intoxicated homeless man was harassing the customers. Cooper hoped he wouldn't have to make an arrest that would kill two hours booking the man into jail. He wanted a few quiet moments to read over the sergeant's manual. The grocery store parking lot was full of customers. The store manager was waiting near the entrance.

"That man is harassing my customers. Everytime one of them walks out of the store, he asks for money, and if they don't give it to him, he yells and swears at them. He even scared a little kid."

The homeless man looked a mess. His hair was matted on the top; he was unshaven; he probably hadn't washed his clothes in months; and he smelled of urine.

Cooper didn't hate drunks, but they were a nuisance. They often caused problems and wasted a lot of police time. Although the city needed a good detox unit, the developing high tech Silicon Valley didn't seem to have money for such things. Detox units benefited the kind of people most cities don't really care about. There were only a few Detox units in Silicon Valley, and they rarely had vacancies for drunks, for street drunks without money.

"What's going on here? The store manager tells me you your being a pain in the butt to his customers."

"He's telling a goddamn lie."

"Seems to me he wouldn't just say that for no reason at all. What's your name?"

"What do you care? You think I'm in trouble? You're in trouble. You're bad luck. I can see it on you."

**“You are the one with the problem here. I guess you want to go to jail.”**

**The drunk began to walk away toward the parking lot.**

**“Listen. I asked you your name. You cannot just walk away like that.”**

**Cooper went after the drunk, but before he could grab him by the back of the shirt, the drunk was on the ground having a seizure, shaking in catatonic movements, peeing his pants, and cutting his head on the sidewalk.**

**“Just what I needed,” thought Cooper as he walked to his squad car and called for an ambulance. The ambulance would take him to one of three places: the hospital, a detox unit, or jail. Detox units were always full; hospitals couldn’t keep them; and jails tried to get rid of the homeless because of their health problems. Some lived under bridges; some lived out of shopping carts; some lived out of dumpsters. They had no place to go, and nobody wanted to give them a place to live because they could not follow any rules, but in a neighborhood like this, if a drunk behaved himself, he could eat pretty good off donations. Many people fed them or bought them food from the grocery stores.**

**The store manager thanked Cooper as they watched the ambulance drive away. Cooper would follow up later.**

**Heading for the library, a place where the squad car would be close to the main drag, Cooper found his favorite spot near an enormous evergreen that would occasionally drop pinecones on the roof. Opening the sergeant’s manual, Cooper was reminded of earlier days, days spent studying at the police academy, days spent learning police codes and ordinances.**

In the beginning, he had taken his police work seriously, worrying about every little problem. But after years on the force, he had lightened up. He could wind-up from zero to sixty and wind down from sixty to zero. What seemed terrible one moment was like the space between A and B that Felix use to talk about: a span of time, a time to tolerate or a time to enjoy.

He could control his temper. He hardly ever became angry. When he did become angry and ready to explode, he would recognize it by focusing on being in the moment, calming himself by saying it wasn't worth the paper work. Experience had given him the ability to control his reactions, to ignore his feelings, to ignore his impulses, impulses of anger. He could ignore his states of mind and wind up or down depending on what the situation called for.

Sometimes the uniform represented law and order; other times the uniform was a magnet for crazy people, for anger, and for hate. Every night was different. Burn out moments, moments where he felt that everyone was bad or crooked or was out to get him. Now he hoped to become a sergeant, to make more money, to send Milo to college.

Turning on the spotlight in the car, he began studying the sergeant's manual. The temperature was beginning to drop and when he felt like he should put the heat on, he realized it was getting dark. It was time to grab some dinner.

Closing the sergeant's manual, he stretched his arms out wide letting all the tension drain from his shoulders. Gazing to the left and right, becoming aware of his surroundings, Cooper noticed a man near the side entrance to the library. The man was carrying a large turquoise duffel bag that sagged at the bottom from the weight of its

contents. He seemed about to throw the duffel bag in the garbage can when he became aware of Cooper and abruptly changed his mind. He then headed around the corner away from Cooper. Cooper began to record him in his mind: Caucasian male about 5'9, wearing a maroon jacket, acting suspiciously with large duffel bag.

A little action here? The hair on the back of Cooper's neck tingled, triggering his sixth sense. Something didn't feel right. Cooper watched the man disappear. He had no legal reason to stop him. He had no reason at all. But something felt peculiar. He'd had this feeling before. Most of the time there was a reason, a good reason, but he had been wrong a few times too.

Turning the spotlight off inside his squad car, he slowly drove down the street. The remaining daylight was fast disappearing. Cooper began to mull over the situation in his head. Take it slow. Don't jump to conclusions. Be careful. Don't put your nose in something unless you can do it legally. The man was out of sight. Maybe he was going home from work. Maybe it was dirty laundry or work shoes. Maybe it was food, or drugs, or a gun. What did it matter? You can't stop someone just for walking down the street. But why did the man look nervous when he saw the police car and realized he couldn't dump the bag. What was in the bag? Cooper looked up and down the side street, no sign of the man. He was gone.

Cooper headed back to the main road and began to think of food. He usually met his fellow cop friends at a restaurant for dinner. He looked at his watch; the big hand was parallel with the ugly creature. Cooper pulled over again near the library where he would

wait for his buddies. He grabbed the manual again. Just as he opened the book, he saw the man with the duffel bag drive up to the stop sign in a brand new silver sports car.

Was he a drug dealer? The man drove through the stop sign without stopping or noticing Cooper. Flicking on the red light, Cooper put the black and white in gear. The man continued driving as though unaware of the squad car behind him, heading toward the freeway. Cooper turned on his siren. Now aware, the man turned and pulled over near the small barren stretch of land just before the highway on-ramp. Cooper watched him get out of the car. No weapons. Walking steady. No funny movements of the eyes. Dressed nicely.

“Hey, buddy. Didn’t you see the stop sign?” Cooper walked closer to him.

“Sorry. I didn’t notice.” The man began to fidget, watching Cooper out of the corner of his eye.

“Your license and registration please.”

The man reached inside the glove compartment to pull out some papers. Cooper looked at the back seat and floor of the car. He noticed the duffel bag on the floor.

“Where you headed?”

“Work.”

“Where do you work?”

“I was just fired. I just picked up my things and was going to throw them out.”

Cooper wanted to look in the bag. He had that feeling on the back of his neck again.

“What were you going to dump at the library?”

“Nothing.” The man began to put his hands in his pockets but then took them out.

“Let me see what is in the bag.”

“Just dirty work clothes. All my stuff from the job.”

Cooper opened the back door. The man just then bolted from his car and began to run. He ran quickly with long strides, his feet making crunching sounds on the pebbles as he raced toward the freeway. Cooper could wind-up from zero to sixty or wind-down. He was angry and he paced himself quickly after the man.

“Why’d ya have to do that!” he yelled after the man.

The man was running faster and faster. Cooper was pacing himself in longer strides not too far behind him, but his police gear, all thirty-five pounds, weighed him down.

“Stop! You’re just making matters worse!”

Finally, lunging himself forward, Cooper grabbed the man, pinned him down with his knee on the man’s back, and clicked the hand cuffs on him.

“Whatcha got in the car buddy? Some drugs? A gun? You just bought yourself some time. Why’d ya run away?”

“You don’t want to know. You had no right to stop me.”

“I had every right, asshole.”

“You’re making an illegal search.”

“I don’t give a shit, asshole. You made me rip my pants and get all sweaty. I don’t like that. Are the drugs worth it?”

“You don’t have anything on me. There’s nothing in the bag. You made an illegal stop for nothing. You’re the one who’s in trouble. You made an illegal stop.”

Cooper walked him back to the squad car. After checking the man for weapons, he placed him in the back seat of the squad car.

It was dark now. He opened the back door of the man’s car. The car light wasn’t working so he went back to the squad car to get a flashlight. The man began to yell.

“Get the hell out of my car! Leave my things alone! You have no right!” He began to kick the seat.

“Shut the hell up, asshole.”

“You can’t talk to me like that. You can’t. You’re making an illegal search. You got no goddamn right.”

“Look, I can do whatever I want. I can throw your ass in jail. I can throw you in the garbage. Now shut the hell up.”

Cooper turned the flashlight on and opened the back door. On the floor of the back seat was the large turquoise duffel bag. Cooper picked it up off the floor and put it on the seat. The bag was heavy and oddly wet on the bottom, and sagging with a load that seemed too heavy for an ordinary duffel bag. Cooper unzipped the bag and saw a rolled-up white sheet that smelled of urine. Better get gloves, he thought. Maybe he’s a damn weirdo.

Cooper walked back to the squad car. The man was quiet now, watching Cooper put on his leather gloves. Cooper always carried gloves for moments like this. “What am I gonna find in the car, asshole? A bag of drugs?”

The man said nothing. Cooper paused, feeling wound up. Better wind down. Running after someone always fired up his adrenaline. What if it's a dead animal or rotten food? What if it is nothing but dirty laundry? I better wind down.

Back at the car, he picked up the white sheet. It was heavy. He grabbed it by the edge and let it unravel onto the seat. It fell on the seat with a thud. It was stiff and cold. A baby, a little baby girl. Cooper turned her over. She was dead.

"Oh, my God! What have you done? Oh, my God!"

There were bruises across her head. Choke bruises on her neck. Bruises across the belly. Blood trickled from her right nostril. Hair matted in blood on the side of her skull.

Cooper couldn't believe his eyes. Why? he thought, as he paced back and forth beside the car. Why! He pounded his fist on the hood. "I can't believe this! I can't!" He looked at the child again. Her eyes were open, a dead blank stare; the kind of stare he had seen before. He walked back to the squad car, picked up the radio, and called for help. He then went to the back of the squad car and opened the door.

"Get out."

"What are you gonna do to me? I confess. What are you gonna do to me? I got rights, you know."

"I said get out, asshole. Get out now."

"No."

"Asshole, I want you to see what you did."

"It doesn't matter. I lost my temper. It was an accident. She wouldn't shut up."



**“She’s a baby. She is a baby!”**

**“She was always a horrible child. From the moment she came out she never shut up. Just like her mother. Never shuts up. Always a mind of her own. She’s happy now. She’s very happy now. She won’t cry anymore. You don’t understand. Some children cry all the time; they have minds of their own; they don’t do what you say; they don’t listen; they are not meant to be here.”**

**“Shut up! Shut your damn mouth!”**

**Cooper grabbed him by the shirt. “Look at her. Why did you hurt her? Tell me!” Cooper could feel his temples pulsating. “Tell me!” He could hear his heart pounding in his head. “Tell me!”**

**A force came over him as he slammed the man against the ground. “Tell me!” “Tell me!” He did not hear the back-up squad car drive up.**

**“Cooper, stop it! Cooper stop! Whatever it is, he’s not worth it. Stop! You’re going to kill him.”**

**Cooper could wind-up from zero to sixty and wind-down from sixty to zero. He could be alert and ready to strike out or relaxed and ready to listen. He wanted to choke him, but he stopped. He pushed himself off the ground, brushing off his uniform. He watched the other officers pull him off the ground. The man began to yell, saying things that make Cooper wind-up again.**

**“You don’t understand, she deserved it. You don’t understand.” Cooper felt the entire force of his being holding him back, holding him back from the man’s neck, from making the man fade into oblivion.**

And after they drove off with the man, after the coroner came for the child, Cooper sat motionless in the front seat of his squad car. On the far corner of the seat, there was the sergeant's manual. He looked at his watch. The big hand was on the dark side getting close to the melted, droopy clock with the large fly. He took the watch off, put it in his pocket, and felt the memory of the dead child's eyes staring at him, the eyes blank and frozen, cold and dead.

After a while, just sitting there, Cooper pulled the watch out of his pocket, glanced at it again and wondered. Was it a nightmare? Was it a bad dream? Was it reality?

He replayed the events in his mind. He was sorry he hit the man. He was sorry he threw the man down; not because the man didn't deserve it, but because he had lost control. He knew how to conduct himself on the job; he was a cop after all; he had duties and he had pride in himself. Ugliness was part of the job. Ugliness was something you anticipated from day to day, something you lived with and expected. Something you detached yourself from.

Cooper sat there, he put his hand over the face of the watch, feeling the smoothness on the palm of his hand, thinking of his son, thinking of the arguments about art, thinking of the Dali painting. And then he knew. He knew what the painting meant. He understood the clocks with the bugs, the barren tree, the sky lit up by an eerie sun, the painting described as an "irrational reality."

### Wisteria

*Letting go all else, cling to the following few truths. Remember that man lives only in the present, in this fleeting instant: all the rest of his life is either past and gone, or not yet revealed. This moral life is a little thing, lived in a little corner of the earth; and little, too is the longest fame to come – dependent as it is on a succession of fast-perishing little men who have no knowledge even of their own selves, much less of one long dead and gone.*

*—Marcus Aurelius Meditations*

Because she had been deep in thought, Juliana Zapata found herself writing the wrong name. Ever since she had “gone out” for a couple of months, gone under cover, sometimes she would find herself confused about her real identity. Now, in the grocery store, she found herself writing the wrong name. At her apartment, she would forget to collect her mail only to remember it was in the other name. By the beach, she would find herself wandering and not responding to Julio’s call because he was calling her by her other name, Melody. Some days she was Juliana Zapata; other days she was Melody Valdez. Lately, it was difficult to know herself, to know the real person she was inside. But the assignment was coming to an end soon, very soon. At the end of the day, the confusion would stop.

Today she was Melody Valdez, undercover, helping in a big drug bust. Today, thirty to forty pounds of methamphetamines were coming from south of the border. Julio’s men would then cook it at the meth lab up in the wine country. Julio would show Melody the meth lab today. Today also was the day of the raid, the day the SWAT team, the IRS, the narcotic division of the Silicon Valley Police Department, and the Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement would invade the winery and break the cartel.

**“You wrote the wrong name,” the sales lady said, giving her a suspicious look.**

**“I’m sorry. I forgot. I was using my mother’s name.”**

**The excuse would have been a good one if the sales lady were Mexican. A Mexican woman never drops her father’s name, always carrying the identity of the generation before into the generation after. American women thought they were liberated using the hyphenated name, but to a Mexican, the last name of a woman was her father’s, then her husband’s name. No one ever bothered to find out how the names worked.**

**The momentary lapse frightened Juliana, the confusion of identities between the kind of Mexican American she really was gave her a gnawing feeling of regret, regret for what was to come and regret for what could not be.**

**She had gone to the store to purchase food for a picnic and to cook for Julio; to cook for him as though he were the man she was about to love forever, as though he were the man from whom she would take his name in love and marriage. But Julio was not that kind of man. Julio was a man of inconsistencies, a man with a dark side, yet a man for whom she had grown to feel a strong attraction. She liked his smell, the way he wore light-colored clothing and esparillas, the way he said “tíz nada.” But Julio was two men: the nice man who loved good food and wine and the man who sold drugs regardless of where they ended. And he called her his little Chiquita as though she was a dumb banana, as though she was soft and easy to peel open and know her center.**

**She stopped for a moment, placing the plump tomatoes in the basket alongside the onions, the cilantro, and hot red chilies. She placed them carefully beside the wine and the beer, regretting that the groceries would end up back in her house instead of a meal**

for Julio, if the day unfolded as it was supposed to. She regretted that her secret weapon had been the food. Julio liked her shapely body and loved her tasty food.

Julio had told her that the refrigerator in the house up in the wine country was empty. Her cooking was a way of getting close, getting inside Julio's world. It was a weapon that worked better than sex in many cultures. Julio's kitchen was the meth lab, the kitchen for those who made money on the weaknesses of others. For this, she cooked what Julio wanted, learning what he liked and perfecting her skills as a warrior sharpens a spear, as a witch gives a potion. The cooking was an excuse, too, if needed, if things became too rough, if things became ugly.

She was told when she took the job that one must draw the limits on one's behavior. Julio wanted her to use drugs, and she had been told to go as far as she was willing to go to get what she wanted: to break the cartel. They told her that if she had to use drugs to keep her cover or to keep herself from getting killed, then to do so. The department had solutions for every kind of problem she might encounter. She had a nearby partner that knew her every move. She wasn't scared for her life. On the contrary, she was sure of herself since she had taken the assignment.

The assignment came after a few years of making several successful drug busts. She would use snitches, wear a wire, and get arrested along with the criminals, then get released when it was time to "come in." Juliana Zapata knew how to handle herself. But she had gone far with Julio. It had been up to her to decide how far she would go. Getting someone like Julio was something Juliana had wanted for a long time. She was willing to do whatever was needed. Drugs were evil.

The motivation for Juliana to join the narcotics division had come a long time ago, with the impending death of Gustavo Montenegro. Gustavo, a fifteen-year-old neighbor, football player, and A-student, was dying from Hepatitis C, a disease he acquired because his older sister had invited him to “enjoy a little entertainment.” He was slowly rotting away with liver failure with no prospects for a liver transplant in the near future. Juliana was an only child, and Gustavo was like a little brother to her.

Staring out the window of her apartment, she listened to the voices of the children playing in the playground. Their voices filled the air like the very air itself, the sounds of the children permeating through the open windows. Julio was on his way. To Julio, the weekend would be a romantic getaway with Melody at the vineyard. To Melody, the weekend would be the end of the cartel. How could Julio reconcile himself as the drug lord of the cartel? How could Juliana reconcile herself to being a partner to Julio, to winning Julio’s heart only to see him go down in the raid? She felt like a traitor to Mexicans, even though it was the right thing she was doing. She felt like a sell-out. Julio was an intelligent man. Perhaps under different circumstances, he would have been a good man, a man who helped many, but reality had not supported that ideal, the Julio that Juliana wished she could love.

The sound of Julio’s car woke her from her pensive mood. She smiled at him through the window.

“Hello my little Chiquita,” he said. “I can hardly wait to be with you. Wait until you see the vineyard.”

The car was gleaming like crème pearl in the sunlight, like a chariot to another world. They packed the food in the back, and the smell of the rice and the taquitas and the fresh buritos and tortillas flavored the air.

“Do you mind if we drive with the top down?” Julio asked.

“No. It will be good.” Juliana responded.

“What did you bring for us to eat my little cook, my little Chaquita?”

“I made Mexican rice and burritos and taquitas. I made them Texas style with flour tortillas.”

“I’m hungry already. Maybe if we do not get there too late, you can go to the store and stock the kitchen for when my business partners come.”

“I packed us enough to last until Monday. I have been looking forward to seeing this ranch of yours with a vineyard. Vineyards make me think of grapes and gardens and flowers. Tell me about the vineyard and the arbor,” she begged.

“In the back of the main house is a pool, then a fence, with a gate that leads to an arbor, an arbor with big bunches of wisteria hanging through the slats. Beneath that is a gravel path with table grapes growing along both sides. You can plant a garden near the apple, plum, and fig trees. It reminds me of ancient gardens—old oaks, olive trees, and of course grapevines. The grapevines stretch a head for a mile, but the vineyards have long been neglected. I hope to restore the vineyards and maybe sell some wine. I will make some just for you, called Melody Sanchez wine, the finest in the country, the finest in the world.”

When Julio talked like this she forgot who he really was, and it was one of those moments when the wall inside of her became a portcullis, letting him closer to her fortified heart, letting him drop and tangle like wisteria flowers on an arbor.

“Do you know the name of the wine they used to make there was called?”

“It had a Greek name. It was called *Phantasia*.”

“Sounds like the name of a children’s movie.”

“Actually, it has something to do with Greek philosophy. It means when something becomes obvious.”

For a moment she felt a chill, the kind of a chill that makes you sweat.

“That’s a funny name for a wine.”

“That’s what I told my business partner. He’s meeting us up there.”

She had never asked him just what his business actually was. In fact, that is why he trusted her so completely. She recalled the time when someone came to his home as they were eating dinner and insisting to the maid that Julio come to the door:

“Why do you come to where I live?” he said in Spanish.

“The shipment is here, and there is a problem.”

“You fix it,” he yelled. “Take care of it. And I will pay you.”

“Say nada. It is done.”

When he returned to the table, his mood had changed.

“Is something wrong Julio?”

“Say nada,” he replied, ending the conversation.



She asked nothing. She had slipped out of the room to the bathroom in the hall to get a glimpse of the man, and stood on top of the toilet to read the license plate. She heard one of Julio's thugs kicking the man over and over, the man screaming and begging for him to stop. It was better to pretend you did not care and had no interest. On other nights, the sounds of screaming, fighting, and cars screeching away would awaken her. On other nights her skin would crawl when she heard men with hushed voices, men with names and faces that she had studied while she pretended to be shy, looking away from them so they would think she was only a woman, a woman with no power or danger, a woman who presented no threats because all she could do well is cook, cook like a goddess, like a witch.

Julio trusted her because she did not ask questions. She tried to pretend that she didn't care, while carefully standing behind curtains, listening here and there, but never obviously. When she watched Julio kick and beat someone one night, Julio saw her brushing her hair near the window. When Julio came in and kissed her, there was blood on his pants.

"You do not ask me anything Melody. That is why I like you. Those things are not a woman's concern."

"I do not ask because I do not want to know. There is good and bad in the world, Julio. All is not what it seems, so I do not concern myself." But she did concern herself, staring at the sky for hours until the sun came up and all that was dark became light.

The wind blew. The gate creaked. Julio walked out the back of the house toward the vineyard. He extended his hand towards Juliana's; he extended his hand like a lover pulling him toward himself.

"Come my little Chaquita."

He clasped her hand and she smiled. Sunlight came from behind a cloud causing a glare across her sunglasses. His hands felt smooth. His lips brushed across her forehead, and for a moment she wished she could let herself love him. It was beautiful. The wisteria raining flowerets across the air, sun rays shining through the spaces in the arbor.

Julio walked ahead to the end of the arbor. Leaning against the end of the arbor, he lit a cigar and smiled at her.

"What are you looking at, my little Chiquita?"

She smiled. "I was thinking of how beautiful it is here and how I wish it could be this way forever."

For a while, she traced his silhouette with her eyes, one side of him had the light of the sun, the other side the dark of shadow. If only they could be a man and a woman under the sun, in the climax of the day, fading out like the sunlight; if only they could be the couple who shared the loaf of bread and jug of wine. In his face there was a yearning for her, a yearning that she had protected herself from with the shield of the memory of Gustavo Montenegro. The memory of Gustavo's gaunt yellow face, the color of sickness and creeping death, stood between them.

Julio's pants were loose-fitting, slouching across his feet, adding to the relaxed moment that she knew would soon end, as soon as she walked through the arbor. He was planning a long evening of work to be done. The smell of the cigar drifted through the arbor. The tiny flower droplets of the wisteria flowing through the air with gentle breezes like small bubbles a child blows through a hoop, raining in the arbor sporadically as the light began to fade.

"Is there any of the wine from this vineyard left in the house?" she asked.

"There were a few bottles, but I uncorked one and it was pretty bad. Maybe you can use it in your cooking."

She did not say anything. The light was like strokes of color and sun through the holes of the arbor. He flung his cigar on the ground with two fingers, crushing it with his foot. The light was almost gone. She walked through the arbor and it was over.

And as the end began to unfold, as the men began to appear out of nowhere, Julio turned to her, not in disbelief, but with a face of yearning, yearning for what would never be. The tiny flower droplets of wisteria continued to rain across the arbor, the fading light between the slats was gone.

Later, she walked across the vineyard, across the field and under the arbor. Shaking tiny flowerets from her hair, she turned, looked at the vineyard, then climbed in an unmarked police car the others had left her.

"Are you all right, Juliana?" one of the agents asked.

"Yes. I'm fine. It was a good bust. A large supply is gone now. Julio is out of business and so are many more."

**“You were really involved in this case.”**

**“Yes. But I tell myself he was a bad man who did bad things to many, a man who had no conscience when it came to the things he did to others.”**

**“Are you sure you're okay? You've been under a long time.”**

**“I'm fine.”**

**The agent walked away, and she sat there under the arbor for a long time until total darkness engulfed the vineyard, and finally she sauntered to the car, slipped behind the wheel, headed out of the driveway, confused for a moment by the circular driveway. She had been in unfamiliar territory, and there were two ways out.**

Jaded

*Fate leads the willing, drags the recusant.*

--Marcus Aurelius *The Moral Essays*

PLEASE READ ATTACHED NOTE BEFORE REMOVING COVER!

Dear Al,

Please excuse me for leaving you a note, but I did not want you to discover the fate of your birds, Hercules and Amazon, and I intend to talk to you very soon about the situation I am about to explain. When you asked me to watch your birds and house sit for you the two weeks that you would be vacationing in Jamaica, I felt compelled to watch the birds to repay a favor since you were so hospitable and you allowed my wife and me to be your guest for the three days our house was tented for termites (even though my wife did not want to be your guest because she does not like to owe people favors).

Although I have never owned any birds, especially rare tropical birds and was reluctant to take on the responsibility, I felt compelled to repay your kindness and had the best of intentions for those little caged creatures that are so colorful and brought you so much joy; I felt compelled to watch your rare tropical birds, and I had the best of intentions.

Unfortunately, my ignorance led to not such a good situation for your birds Amazon and Hercules. (Where did you ever get such names for your birds?) I hope after I recap the events that led to the situation with your birds, you will remember that my intentions were honorable, after all checking the water, cleaning the bottom of the cage, adding

bird feed, and turning the heat on if the temperature dropped seemed like an easy task for a fifteen year old vet on the police department, like a no-brainer.

The first morning it was sunny. I thought of you lying on the beaches of Jamaica as I went over to your house as planned. I brought in the newspaper (I was surprised you forgot to stop the paper—not like you. Al). I checked for mail. And I checked the birds topping off the water—it looked like you left more than enough water. The birds seemed pretty happy in the cage, so I opened the blinds for a little while and let them soak up the warm winter sun.

The second night, however, was different. The mail and newspaper were no problem, but when I opened the birdcage, Hercules quickly flew out, flying to high places, refusing to come down, while Amazon, with her bright orange chest, croaked loudly in the corner of the cage. I spent the next hour enticing Hercules to come down, making me late for the squad meeting at the beginning of the shift. Luckily, Herc finally landed on my shoulder, pecked my finger, and crapped on my uniform while yelling his favorite, “Shut up, asshole!” (That was truly a disgusting saying you taught him, Al. What if you have children some day?)

To get back to my story, needless to say, I wasn’t very fond of either Hercules or Amazon at this point. I showed up at a quarter past seven for the squad meeting. To me, birds belong in trees or on plates nicely cooked for Thanksgiving, so I really felt I was laying aside my opinion of birds to repay your favor. My wife always reminds me that she wanted to stay in a hotel when our house was tented, but I felt we could save the three

days room charge by staying with you. She reminded me of this as she was cleaning the shoulder of my uniform—perhaps she was right.

My wife was grateful for your hospitality, but she feels that my money-saving measures always end up costing us more money. She did not mind that I was watching your birds; in fact, she didn't even remind me about our last adventure together with you on the Russian River Raft Trip, you know, the time I broke my arm. Nor did she bring up the time you and I tried to fix the front door and planed it down too much, causing a big gap around the bottom. Though she did feel compelled to say, "How much will it cost us this time?" I should have listened.

Anyway Al, to get back to the fate of your birds, on the third night I had intended to stop at your house before my shift to feed the birds, etc. However, I didn't want to be late for the briefing again. (The day had already started on the wrong foot because I ran over the garbage can backing out of my driveway and it took me a half our to remove the can from the bottom of my car.) So, Al, I decided that I would check the birds after my shift. Now I realize I should have gone by your house first. But, you know how it is in police work, the right behavior for a given situation always seems easier to know after the fact.

As you know, Al, I have been training that female police cadet, and the day I could have used her the most, she calls in sick. Well, to get back to the birds, I thought I would take a quick jaunt over there in the squad car at lunchtime. I figured it would only take a couple of minutes, and I could bring the paper and mail in at the same time. But fate had other plans for me. I began to head over to your house, thinking I was glad I

wore my leather jacket because it was a really cold day in Silicon Valley. A few pipes had burst in various places and homeowners were warned to cover plants to prevent frost bite and not let the house get too cold so that water pipes wouldn't freeze and burst. All the while, you are in Jamaica, soaking up the sun, and no doubt studying the girls in bikinis, lucky bugger.

Thoughts of Jamaica, girls on the beach, and birds needing feeding quickly went out of my mind when, within two blocks of your home, a Filipino woman hailed me at the corner yelling "Help, police! I need help! Please help me!"

I was out of my district but I pulled over anyway. Her name was Felicidad, and she was the caretaker of the boarding care home with all the psychiatric patients that you always complain about. You know, the one with the coffee cans lined up on the front porch overflowing with cigarette butts all the time.

"My patient she naked. She no come in."

"Where is she?"

"Dat way."

I walked through the center of the house. The house was very clean, and I could smell something good cooking in the kitchen, so I realized it was one of the "good" boarding care homes, the ones where someone actually cared about the patients.

"Do you have a blanket? And what is her name?"

"I get you one. Helen is her name."

I swear when I went outside that it was so cold that I could feel the cold air blowing up the sleeves of my leather jacket—you would think that a \$300 police jacket



would keep you warm on such a day. And there she was smoking a cigarette and naked, a naked white woman, who was as naked as a jaybird, no pun intended.

“Hello, Helen. Damn! It’s cold out here.”

Helen kept smoking her cigarette in a cloud of smoke, puff after puff. She kept smoking with no awareness of the cold at all. It is peculiar when I think of that part of it now. She seemed oblivious to the cold, and also oblivious to me. She wasn’t even shivering, and her white skin wasn’t even red. Well, I tried talking to her in my convincing voice.

“Helen, I would like you to come inside and put some clothes on so we can talk.”

She kept smoking as though she was appropriately dressed, ignoring me as though I wasn’t standing in front of her in almost below zero weather.

“Helen we can do this the easy way or the hard way.”

She threw the cigarette in a can and walked in my direction. I was hopeful. (I really didn’t want to wrestle a naked woman to the ground.) But just as she approached the back door, she made a quick exit out the side gate, and started running down the street. So there I was, chasing this large, middle-aged, stark-naked woman trotting down the street. People were honking their horns as they drove by, cheering her on as if this was some Olympic event.

“Helen, stop!” I yelled repeatedly and shouted in my shoulder radio while in full pursuit, “This is 67 Bravo in foot pursuit of a 5150, NEED ASSISTANCE NOW!”

The Filipino woman trailed behind me somewhere bringing the blanket. I was at a loss as to what to do. If I threw her down on the sidewalk, naked, that would be a pretty

rough landing for the old bird (she looked a lot older than fifty). She was crazy and naked, Al, but you know she wouldn't hurt anyone. And you could see she didn't have any weapons on her.

As we proceeded our little chase down the street, I looked for grass and for police back-up. If I could jump her on the grass, maybe she wouldn't get hurt too bad or scraped too much. A patch of grass appeared and I saw my chance. I jumped her, brought her down, and placed the cuffs on her. I scraped my knee pretty good, Al, which ripped a hole in my pants, and I ripped my leather jacket. As she stood up, the caretaker handed me the blanket, which I pulled around her, but she kept squirming to make it fall off. Back-up then finally arrived. My luck again, it was your friend and mine, Mr. Wise-Ass, Sergeant Dave McIntyre.

"Hey, Ed, what's a matter—can't control your prisoners?" Typical Dave McIntyre wise-ass remark.

"Don't ask, buddy," I replied.

"What better thing to do in such nice weather? Hey, I didn't know this was your district," he continued.

"Don't ask. Of all the experiences to have on the coldest day of the year, what other fate can I expect?" And I wanted to say that I would never have been out of my district if I had not been on my way to feed your birds. But he didn't get too mad at me for being out of my district since I did catch the crazy bird.

"Don't say that Ed old boy; you know it's bad luck. You know you're never supposed to say that. You still have a few hours left to your shift."

I thought of you in Jamaica again, Al, sipping an exotic drink, splashing around in warm tropical water—lucky bugger, lucky, lucky, bugger.

There weren't any more incidents for the remainder of my shift, but I didn't make it over to your house until afterwards, which brings me back to Amazon and Hercules. At the end of my shift, your birds were my first priority, Al, lest you think I was uncaring or irresponsible in my duties.

Upon arriving at your house, the newspaper was in the driveway and I tossed it in the recycle bin. I checked both sides of the house for possible broken pipes because I knew the heat was off. Everything seemed A-OK. I brought in the mail and threw it in the basket. Hey Al, I even came prepared. I had brought with me a turkey baster and a vacuum cleaner. That way, I figured I could clean out the cage and replace the water without opening their cage door.

Hercules seemed pretty quiet, you know, none of his crude expressions, so I came to the conclusion that he must be asleep. But when I lifted the cover from the cage, I found Hercules and Amazon on their sides, with their little feet sticking straight out. Unfortunately, they were stone cold dead.

So when you lift this cover, you will notice two new birds. (My wife doesn't know about this because they cost me \$500.) So please forgive me, Al, for accidentally killing Amazon and Hercules. And meet your new birds.

Sincerely,

Ed Gonzales

P.S. If you're wondering where I am and why I didn't pick you up at the airport, I'm working a side-job to pay for new pants, a jacket, and new birds. Hope you had a good time. No more favors buddy!

The White Down Comforter

*"And ships upon untamed seas."*

*—Auden*

The white fluorescent dial glowed 5:30 AM. Is it a workday or a day off?

Daylight savings made Miriam feel disoriented. Today is Sunday. Miriam pulled the worn comforter over her shoulders. Still feels cold, this quilt is too old; the filling is flat; the cotton is thin. Time to buy a new one. Good sales on Sundays, all the sale flyers will be in the paper. Get first pick if the Emergency Room isn't too busy. Weekends always horrendous, but that's the nursing profession, work weekends, work holidays, around the clock. Time marches on. The Trojan Horse. The Emergency Room is like a reverse Trojan Horse pulled in the middle of all the problems of the cities except no one climbs out to Troy, everyone climbs in waiting to be healed, and the horse spits you out at the end of your shift. No rest for the weary. The gods of chaos have no mercy: they fight with guns; they fight with knives; they fight with fate. They never bargain. They just take over. Would the gods win today? Need coffee. The only legal drug, caffeine. Have to have it. Have to have it or the day never seems right. Cat puked on the rug again.

Miriam walked into the living room to the space where the sofa once sat and put her feet on the dents in the carpet. Gave the sofa to Patrick. Patrick happy now. Did that right. The kettle whistled. One spoon, two spoons. Need one good cup, that's all, just one good cup. Maybe the only thing I get to drink until noon. Never know on Sundays. The house is so empty. I have to buy a new sofa. Not today. That would require a big bargain hunt. Instant coffee, better than brewed. Allowed fifteen minutes extra sleep.

Time ticking, better get moving. Can't be late. What assignment today? Miriam looks at the assignment board: triage. Hate triage.

The triage nurse has to sit at the desk and sign in the walking wounded.

Sometimes there were real emergencies. Sometimes there were patients too lazy to make appointments in clinics or who worked during the week and didn't know clinics were open in the evening. Other patients didn't know any better. And still others were just plain annoying. Moles and ingrown toenails two years. Acne. Rash from hair dye. Body lice. Bugs that weren't there. Never knew what to expect at triage. Sit at the desk. Sign in the sick. Make the best of it. Ready and waiting. Not so bad, just rather be in bed like the rest of California. Get the right attitude. Sometimes people are downright angry and mean if they have to wait. Need more coffee. That was pretty often. Triage empty. Miriam walked inside to speak to Larissa.

"I'm escaping triage."

"Quiet?"

"Yes. Larissa, are there any good bedding sales this week?" Larissa always knew the best sales anywhere. Every Sunday, Larissa and Miriam planned their sales strategies. Larissa was the kind of person who manages to drop off her dry cleaning, go to the bank, and buy something for lunch, all in the span of a half hour.

"Here's the ad for Bargain Bedding."

The sale flyers were the best part of the newspaper, except for the odd pieces like when Lorena Babbit emasculated her husband or when the woman in England had

octuplets because of fertility drugs, whose husband was also fathering another woman's children. There were the Ann Landers' columns and a Farside joke or two.

The sale flyers appeared and disappeared all over the Emergency Room--below charts, above racks of lab slips, strewn all over the break room table, or in the drawers of the nurse's station. And they also disappeared whenever their boss Leona worked. To her, crossword puzzles, sale flyers and the like were forbidden non-work items. "The Emergency Room is serious business," they were reminded by administration. Downtime, time when the Emergency Room was not busy was to be used for stocking and cleaning. But that never stopped anyone. They just hid them.

Larissa handed her a paper, "Bargain Bedding has a great sale--comforters are 40% off. They have some great down comforters."

Miriam flipped through the flyers. A fake Leopard quilt. No, that would have been okay in my wild days. A big flower ruffled quilt. No, that would make me feel like I'm a little girl, minus the patent leather shoes. An over-priced denim quilt. That would be like sleeping in my jeans. But on the last page of the flyer was a white brass bed with a beautiful white down comforter laid over it. The squares of the comforter were perfectly even, smooth, puffy, and full. The boxes were double-stitched to keep the down inside, virtually locking the white down in each box for maximum comfort. And it had a five-year warranty, though that didn't matter because she knew she'd never find the receipt in five years.

"Yes," Larissa interrupted Miriam's thoughts, "That's the one. It has 233 thread count and one ounce of down fills 525 cubic inches of space with double-stitched corded

edges. Now that's a bargain. And look at the price. That's a heck of a good price. If I didn't have one myself, I'd buy one."

The Code 9 radio intruded with its obnoxious buzzing: the paramedics were coming. Miriam grabbed a pencil and paper, picked up the receiver and pressed a button on the handle.

"This is Silicon Valley General--go ahead."

The radio blared, "This is 313. We are inbound Code 3 with a 42-year-old male motorcycle rider who was driving at highway speed, hit a truck making a U-turn, separated from his bike and flew over the handlebars fifty feet. He has a blood pressure of 70 by palpation, heart rate of 140, and his lung sounds are unequal. He is combative and non-verbal. We have started two large bore intravenous lines and have him in cervical spine precautions. ETA 5 minutes.

Miriam turned to Larissa, "Call a Major Trauma Alert."

"When will it be here?"

"ETA is five minutes."

Larissa picked up the microphone. "Major trauma ETA 5 minutes. Charge nurse to the West desk."

Gretchen, the charge nurse, rushed to the front desk.

"Whatcha got?"

"Here Gretchen, it doesn't sound good. He might have a head injury. He's already in shock--his blood pressure is 70 palp and his pulse is 140. And he obviously



has a chest injury--unequal chest sounds.—Hypotension, tachycardia and chest injuries, maybe a collapsed lung, hemothorax."

"Sounds pretty bad. Thanks."

Bernie the clerk from triage and registration area came in and interrupted them.

"Miriam it looks like the bus came in, there's a bunch of people waiting out there for you."

"I'll be right there."

No time for sales now. Have to get to triage. Well, here we go. The day has taken off at a running start and it's Sunday. She stuffed the Bargain Bedding flyer in her pocket.

A Hispanic patient with long black hair in a pony tail wearing a short skirt and a blouse was sitting at her desk.

*"Usted habla espanol? Tengo una bola en mi inglee."*

"No, I'm sorry I don't speak Spanish. Can you wait momento? I'll get a translator.

*"Ha estado lenchado por tres dios."*

"Let me get a translator."

Miriam walked back just as the paramedics scurried past, pushing the trauma patient on a stretcher, squeezing bottles of saline into his veins. Miriam peered over the counter. Looks bad. Glad I'm not trauma nurse today.

The wounds of war were evident. Black leather jacket slit down the middle. Black leather pants had slits too. Bone sticking out right leg. Compound fracture. Chest

not moving evenly. Blood all over. Large amount of external blood loss. What about internal bleeding? The heart rate is 150 now on the monitor. He's working hard to stay alive, very hard. Not good. But his chest looks like a man of confidence. Reminds me of who? Augustus of Prima Porta--the statue. A man of confidence. A noble statue. Biker's clothes, the nice kind, expensive black leather. Like armor. Like a shield. What made me think of Augustus? Augustus' chest plate--the cuirass--his armor. Love that statue. Haven't seen it in a long time. Was he marble or bronze?

Lourdes walked up to Miriam. "I'll translate for you."

"Lourdes, could you please ask her why she is here. I think she said something about a ball and she pointed to her groin." Miriam whispered in Lourdes' ear, "I think she is a he or maybe she once was a he and now she is a she, but I don't want to be rude--she could be a woman, too. Could you ask her if she has had any surgeries--any kind of surgeries?"

Miriam scanned the emergency room. Almost empty. The patient's friends were sitting across under window. Triage was in the middle of the Emergency Room. She had to be careful and discreet. If the patient was a he, maybe she didn't want the woman and man with her to know that. Lourdes told them politely to go sit down while she asked the patient personal questions. There's no easy way to ask someone who looks like a woman if she is a man.

Lourdes turned to Miriam, "She says that she has a swollen area in her groin the size of a golf ball and that she has had breast enhancement surgery. She denies any other surgeries. I asked her three times. She thinks she has a hernia."

"Well, Lourdes, I'll just write it like I see it. Twenty-eight year old female, complains of pain to left groin for three days. Thinks she has hernia the size of a golf ball."

That's the torture of triage. Half the time you can't figure out what's going on with patients. Only men get hernias in the groin. Women get Bartholian cysts. Patients often lie because of embarrassment or because family members are around. Or they tell the triage nurse one complaint and the doctor an entirely different one. You never know what to expect. What if she were a woman, just a little homely? Miriam strolled back inside to tell the charge nurse, but Gretchen was busy helping the trauma nurse, Michelle.

Now a line of over twenty patients were signing up on the list to be seen. Miriam began the tedious process of chipping away at the list. Nine o'clock. Two more hours of this. Can't wait to get out of here.

"Miriam, excuse me." It was Victor, the gynecological nurse. He had the hernia patient's chart in his hand. Miriam watched and anticipated.. Here it comes. What did I do now? Victor is always angry. His voice is sharp, his tone angry. He's walking hurriedly, coming to complain no doubt. Divorce didn't help. Glad I got dumped early when I was only thirty. Harder to get dumped at fifty, even for men. He always used to tell me how lucky he was that he didn't have to worry about AIDS. His old lady was screwing his best friend. He's coming to correct me. Help! "What can I do for you, Victor?"

"I think you got this wrong," he said leaning over her. This patient can't have a hernia. Women don't get hernias down there; they get Bartholian cysts. I'm surprised you didn't know that."

He better not get huffy with me. Can't get defensive. Make matters worse. Water off a duck's back. Know who the duck is. "I just wrote that because that's what the patient told me. I even had Lourdes ask her in Spanish."

"Well, I realize you can't take a look out here at triage, but I had her show me the area and she has a Bartholian cyst the size of a golf ball. Dr. Francis will have to lance it."

Miriam watched Victor walk back. Water off a duck's back. Victor, poor Victor. Victor has crap. Lots of crap. Can't walk in it. That's how I stay calm. Don't walk in people's crap. Triage, when will I ever get out of here. Calm now. Calm.

"Victor, hold on a minute. Miriam walked over to the door away from the patients. "Are you sure she is a she and not a he?"

"I saw the cyst myself. I have to get back inside."

Time goes by slowly. Too slow. Get me out of here. "Can I help you?"

The waiting room was filling. Anthony came in with his cowboy boots and started to pace back and forth. Anthony was low on Lithium, his psychiatric med. "Wait Anthony. It's almost your turn." Miriam had been seeing him here for the past ten years, always drooling down the front of the same blue polyester shirt. When he was lonely, he arrived by ambulance. He lived in a halfway house, and he frequently burned the tips of his yellow fingers with his cigarette butts. Poor Anthony. Hands so unsteady all these

years. Now the drugs made him unable to hold even a glass of water without spilling it.

Take the drugs and be saner. Don't take the drugs and be out of control.

Choices. The gods of chance. Who gets what? Who decides? God? The big bad wolf in the sky waiting to pounce on the deer, the lambs. Cynic, big-time cynic. Believe in God; hate religion. Nothing. Bad Catholic. Will surely go to hell. Have to believe. Big bad wolf waiting. Hell. Catholic. The guilt that keeps on giving. God is watching you. God is going to get you. Don't think that way. Work. Work. Sign them in and sign them out. No judgments. Who is crazier, me or Anthony? Just sign them in. Be objective. Hurry up. Line is getting longer.

"Anthony, go sit down now." Miriam's favorite memory of Anthony was the way he smiled when they gave him the donated eel skin cowboy boots. Anthony clacked his boots on the chair in front of the window.

Miriam turned around. It was Victor. "You were right, Miriam. It wasn't a Bartholian cyst. It was a scrotal abscess. Sorry."

"Oh, that's okay. I could tell by her wrists. She had big wrists." Well, so Victor can't tell a cyst from a scrotum. Pretty sad. Must keep a straight face.

"Well, she sure had me fooled."

"Some golf ball, huh?"

"Shut-up, Miriam."

"You gotta admit it, Victor, it is funny. Do you need my son's sex education book? He doesn't need it anymore."

A smile came across Victor's face. He never laughed, and that was as close as you would get to a laugh. What happened to Victor? Why couldn't he ever laugh? Why had one woman changed his life? Was he always that way? Stay out of people's crap.

Miriam remembered her own divorce, a rather sordid affair, her husband ran off with someone he worked with. When he marched out the door with all his luggage, and he had a lot of luggage, she remembered fighting the tears and saying, "This will not ruin my life." She had a son. She didn't want to put that all on him, all the anger and hate and the love that had to be forgotten, and she had done that right. She had something to show for that. Yet she was like Victor, alone. Oh well. It was some golf ball and she fought laughter as she began to sign in the next patient.

Jora, packing a huge purse over her shoulder, pushed open the gate to the triage desk and flung the gigantic red purse over the arm of the other chair. Her purse matched her lip stick and her bright red scrubs. "That looks heavy Jora."

"It is. Sorry I'm late. Lots of Sunday traffic. I'd better go inside and find Gretchen and find out what she wants me to do."

Jora always late. Too much make-up. Looks out of place. Maybe I'm jealous. I can't wear bright red. Makes me look like a clown. Her hair dips in place. Jora's hair always had a perfect dip in the back and every hair was frozen in place. She'd bat her eyes at paramedics, but they didn't seem to go for the over-made china doll look. Meow. Being a cat. Look at me. Jane Doe, RN, generic. Short. Fat. Stout. Besides, Jora wore her mask so everyone could see it. Jora was a piece of art.

Miriam loved to call people she didn't understand "art." Miriam loved art history. One question plagued her--the definition of art? What was art? There was no definitive answer. She remembered that a friend once said it was collective, the sum of all its meanings. Pretty philosophical for a Sunday. But what about her old friend's question, "Was it fair to all those who died to build a cathedral, to those who went without and toiled and sweat and bleed to create a cathedral, to call it a work of art? The world of art wasn't easy. But we remember cathedrals. One man gets praised. The man who built it. The big bad wolf did it. Nursing is called an art. In a way it is. But was it anymore? Was it?

Art + nursing + medicine = insanity. I'm going insane.

There was a standard Emergency Room joke: What is normal?

Gretchen met Jora in the hallway. "Late again?"

"Yes." Jora answered and then walked away.

"Well Michelle hasn't had a break. She's been stuck in Trauma for the past three hours and she's hungry. They just called and pronounced the trauma patient."

"He looked young." Miriam replied.

"Here's his wallet. I've been trying to find his family, but he has no next of kin info in his wallet."

"Did California Highway Patrol notify anyone?" Miriam asked.

"They couldn't find anyone either."

"I guess we'll call the medical examiner." Miriam replied.

"You can take a look in his wallet and see if you come up with anything if you want. I hate not calling the family."

"Yeah—it seems cold just to have the medical examiner call; besides, they don't always tell them in the nicest way or let them know they can see them."

Michelle returned to the front desk and said,

"Man that was sad, really sad. He had an aortic tear—he bled right out."

"That is sad. No wonder he died. We all know the fatality rate with that injury—100% fatality rate, too bad." Miriam responded.

Gretchen reached in her pocket and pulled out a package of Marlboro lights.

"If you need me, you know where I am."

"Puff-puff time." Gretchen hated when Miriam said that because Miriam reminded Gretchen that she smoked like a chimney. Everyone was always telling Gretchen to quit smoking. Gotta die some time. So what are we doing here?

Miriam opened the ziplock bag and pulled the wallet out. It felt light in her hands. The stitching was worn, a thin address book stuck out of the money side. It always felt like going into someone's house when they weren't home. He was 42 years old. Same age as me. Face looks familiar. Did she know him? Happened once. Classmate's brother from nursing school. Address book empty. No phone numbers. Discount card for Wholesaler's store. Not much money. Receipt for Antique Jewelers. Coin necklace cost \$200.00. Next of kin: blank. No one to call. At least he's not John Doe.



Death Notice. So black and white. Fill in the blanks to mark the end of a man's life.

Miriam walked back to make sure he had a name bracelet on his wrist. She slipped the sheet off. Pools of blood were darkening the sheets. She put the bracelet on his wrist and looked at his face. Young looking, eyes closed. They always made sure the eyes were closed. If the eyes weren't closed, they taped them.

Miriam walked back to the west wing.

"Larissa, call the corner."

"Couldn't find anyone?"

"No."

Forty-two people named Hunt listed in the Mountain View phone book. Can't call every Hunt in the book. A clerk once called the wrong family. Have to be careful. Can't put people through that. No scenario today played out in the family waiting room. No Kleenex boxes, pounding on walls, screams, yelling, sobs. No one hitting the walls, each other, or the staff. No gory details to tell in plain words. No medical procedure that failed to explain. No "I don't think he felt anything." Not God. Not God. We are not God. Learned that early. Doesn't help. Why do this work? Why put the bracelets on dead men? Why save lives? A rare thank you. A rare box of chocolates. Didn't want glory. That was television. Did it for love. Crap. Nursing school crap. Professional. Nurse as a professional. Not like soap operas. No sleeping with the doctors in the hospital. No screwing in the bathroom. Too bad.

"Miriam there's a kid out there wants to know how the trauma patient's doing. I didn't tell him anything. I put him in the family waiting room."

"Thanks, Bernie."

Dr. Johnson met her half-way. "Who let the kid in the family room in?"

"Bernie did."

"She should have asked him who he was--he's the person who hit him."

"Oh no."

"I told him to contact the highway patrol. He's leaving."

"Did we ever find out the details of the accident?"

"The highway patrol said it was a real accident. The kid was driving a truck that was turning around to help a motorist whose car broke down. The sun was in his eyes and he didn't see the motorcyclist. The biker must have thought he did."

"Did you tell the kid he's dead?"

"No. I think his family should get to know first."

The kid looks all of twenty-one. Delivers milk. Doesn't look like he uses drugs. Hair long, but neat. Clothes clean. Honest kid trying to help someone. The gods of fate won that one. One day in your life and you do all your growing up. Too bad. One mistake. Like Kenny Rogers's song about the card game. Fate had her hand in everything or was it the gods of chaos. Children that choke on balloons and whistles, and get hung on drapery cords. Kids on skateboards flying like gods, but dying like people. Mothers who never made it across the street. Ex-lovers who came back for revenge. Reality: ugly. The gods of chaos always in control. Get me out of this horse. Rough

week. Baby drowned in bathtub. Baby dead. Now biker dead. Michelle was a biker too. Riding the waves. Michelle had religion, but she changes churches every few weeks. Always looking for the right church. God has to make auditions for her. The right country club. Christianity. The group. Used to go. Study the bible. Couldn't get into church club. Deacon put his hands up her blouse and whispered bible quotes the whole time. He belonged to the church of the feels. Cynic. Cynic. Catholic what's left of me. Pope. Can't say I love him. Apologized to women. Sorry. Mother Theresa bashed in Vanity Fair. Couldn't buy it. Some Catholic left. Once you're baptized you're always a Catholic. That was the original sin. Tried being Presbyterian. The truth was in the word. Protestants believe in actions; Catholics believe in confession. Michelle reborn. How can you be reborn? Come out of your mother again? No. Accept the Lord. What happened to all the years you didn't accept them? Carte blanche to heaven? If Michelle believed, why change churches every week? Miriam had given up trying to figure Michelle out a long time ago. Stay out of people's crap. Sorry God. Ride the waves.

Michelle had her usual argument. When she was upset she got in fights. It was Gretchen's turn. "Why did you take a forty-five minute break?"

"I forgot the time."

Michelle was oblivious to everyone but herself. The place could be coming apart and she would be talking about her latest ride with her motorcycle club. She selectively paid attention to the pile of patient's charts that indicated the numbers waiting to be seen. She kept a bible in the drawer, put little snatches of scripture on index cards and called

herself God's angel on wheels. Drives me crazy. Susan too with her big diamond she prayed for at Christmas, new house, new car. Oh well. Ride the waves. As Gretchen says, "Get paid by the hour." Crap that doesn't change the reality, stupid crap. Cynic.

What did the psychologist call it? Stress. Michelle called him the stress-buster. Take him seriously. The administration hired him to debrief the staff after the last big Pacheco Pass accident. Family of seven. All flown in from Pacheco Pass, the county death trap, blood alley. It had a big sign that posted the deaths like the lottery numbers. Mother had been pregnant with twins and was dead on arrival, DOA. They did an emergency cesarean section right in the Emergency Department, and the twins were DOA too. Killed by a drunk driver, who was dead at the scene. The psychologist let them vent. Michelle felt it helped a little. A few made gestures of grief. Others felt he was patronizing. Ride the waves.

Miriam didn't go to the debriefing. Felt like taking your underpants off in public. Silicon Valley General didn't usually have money for such things as caring for the staff. The deep stuff was deep crap. Debrief was suppose to let the pressure out of the system. So it wouldn't blow up. The horse hadn't blow up yet. Cynic. Rough week.

Baby girl drowned. Mother put baby in tub to answer phone. Why ten minutes? Why alone? Dead baby, sorry mother, accidentally on purpose? Why didn't she take the kid with her to the phone? Why didn't she have a portable phone in the bathroom with her? Or had she been tired and just made a stupid mistake? Never judge anyone. Glad it wasn't my call. But the kid was dead. Joins the others I'll never know for sure how they died. Gods of fate. Gods of mystery.

Almost lost Patrick once. Close call. Thank God didn't have to live with that one. I was stupid too. Turned my head for a second. Poor mother. Thank God. God is good for something. Chameleon catholic.

Today reminds me of the Paddington Bear day. It was a gray afternoon in September. The Chinese man had on a navy blue tie that hung loosely around his neck as the paramedics compressed his chest in an attempt to start his heart. Penetrating gun shot wound to right chest. Entrance near mediastinum, no obvious exit wound. Weak pulse of 40 on scene. Dr. Herrick decided to crack his chest. Taking the rib spreaders, he laid open the patient's heart, began manually pumping the patient's heart with his hands and placed the flat electric paddles on his heart trying to "kick start" it. Bad sound, ribs being spread open. Bad sound. Her hands had been in his chest too. She was helping the doctor do what they all knew was futile. He was dead.

An hour after work, she had driven to a special toy store to buy a Paddington Bear for Madeline's son. Get out of the car. Two drops of blood on my shoes. What am I doing here? Buying a bear? An hour ago I'm looking at some poor man's naked atrium and ventricles--his heart--and now I'm buying a damn bear. The loss of life makes a bear seem so trivial. An hour from now I'll be sitting at a birthday party watching little Eddie blow out his birthday candles. Insanity. My life is insane. Turn it off. Most the time I can. Sometimes though the dreams come: Axes in the street. Trying to pump on someone's chest, but no strength in my arms. Blood dreams. Knife dreams. Never eat late. Not too much caffeine. Exercise. That was the formula. Works most of the time. Formula for nurses.

It was finally the end of the shift, a Sunday shift. Rest of the world has gone to church, stayed in bed, read the newspaper, exercised, drank coffee, eaten bagels, and I've been here opening a dead man's wallet. Felicia invited me to go for Tango lessons. Not today. Too tired.

She walked outside of the Emergency Room; an ambulance with red lights flashing was backing up. The sun was still shining, but it was fading fast. The days were shorter in the winter. The light in the summer always felt good when your shift ended. It was like some of the day was left for you. Not much day left today. But God created the heavens and the earth and the day and the night and the seasons. Should go to Mass. Guilt. Definitely not a "good" Catholic.

Don't want to go home with the work keys. Miriam reached deep in her pockets and checked for any medication or narcotic keys: no keys. What's this? She pulled out the Bargain Bedding flyer. Almost forgot. Should I go there or shouldn't I. Miriam climbed into her big empty van. Go? Go home? Go to church? Where do I go? I could go to the museum and see the statue of Augustus of Primaporta. He's outside. She drove out of the parking lot. Should I go now or another day. Need something to warm me up in the mornings, something warm and cozy. She found herself headed toward Bargain Bedding. There was parking. That was a good sign.

In a bin, in the middle of the store were the comforters neatly packaged. She stopped a sales clerk.

"Do the down comforters have different thicknesses?"

"There are three kinds: good, better, best. There's a sample over there." Sounds like the three bears. Papa bear. Mama bear. Baby Bear.

Miriam walked to the end of the stand. She liked the medium one. It'll be light, but warm.

"We have a sale on white flannel sheets too."

Blue—boy's color. Green--fades. White--yes. Goes with comforter. Better get home. No, son is gone. House is quiet. No rush. Just puking cat remains. Love the damn cat. Miriam wrote the check. "What's the date? You'd think I'd remember. I've been writing it all day." She pushed the cart through the door, but the doorway was narrow and the door itself was heavy to push back. A lady with a heavy wool skirt helped her with the door. "You bought a quilt, huh, a down one?"

"Yes. I'm quite happy. My son has left home and now I can finally own a white quilt."

"Oh, but think of all the naked little geese who are freezing now because you bought that quilt."

Miriam began to push the cart rapidly down the ramp. Dead geese. Before she could help it, it came out of her. She turned her head and yelled after the lady. "I don't think it matters now. They'd be naked anyway. The feathers are already plucked." She opened the hatch of the van and threw the quilt and the sheets inside. Of all the damn people who could open the door for me, why did it have to be her. Probably belongs to the Sierra Club. Probably recycles. Did she have a cloth bag for the things she bought? Should I bring the comforter home? Or should I return it? I hate when I get like this.

Make a decision. I'm tired. I'm bringing it home. I've got the receipt; I can always return it. What about the naked geese? The poor little naked geese. Crap. Sure rained on my parade. She sat on her sunglasses and then gunned the car out of the parking lot. The Rosicrucian Museum. Should I stop? He's in the courtyard. They don't lock it. I want to see his shield; the shield reminds me of the Iliad, the shield of Achilles. What did they call it? Cuirass.

There was plenty of parking. The museum was closed. The museum always seemed strange with its golden antelopes on the side of the steps and bell shaped capitals on the columns. Egypt in the middle of San Jose. The art of San Jose. She paused for a moment and gazed at the columns. The Egyptians used no cement. The weight of stones held them in place. She thought of the expression of the Sphinx: pessimistic. A troubled age left its weight on the soul. She didn't want to go inside anyway. It was always dark and the shrunken heads gave her the creeps.

She walked to the garden area on the pink sidewalk, painted the same color as the museum. The moss was hard to see in the slipping light. She slipped and went down hard and fast. Silly woman, falling for a stupid Roman statue. She laughed at herself. A Chinese man with a camera offered to help her stand up, but she was too embarrassed. She thanked him anyway, making sure he didn't see her purposely walking toward the statue.

At first she couldn't find the statue. It seemed shorter than she remembered. But there he was in all his beauty and all his art. Speaking to his troops, extending his arm, standing like a Greek with a bent knee to balance his extended arm. And on his chest, the



cuirass, the story of the sky god and the earth goddess and the provinces of Gaul and Spain. Apollo and Diana were there with the sun god, Sol, and the moon goddess, Luna. And the cosmic forces were in balance with each other. His feet were barefoot like a God. Peace in the age of Augustus. He was intelligent. He was serene. He was Augustus.

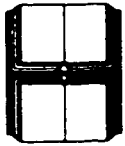
The light was almost gone, it was time to go. She knew she'd be back again, she'd read the story about him again, the story of his shield, of the man, of the first Emperor of Rome. Why did she remember him so well? She couldn't remember the date or what she had for lunch or where she put things, but this was different. Was it the pose? The statue outlived the man.

The drive home was easy. The daylight was gone and the traffic was light. She put the down comforter and the sheets on her bed, placing the squares exactly in the middle. One thing about being a nurse, you know how to make a stupid bed. The cat climbed on top of the quilt. She pushed him off.

Hot steamy shower feels great. Never want to get out. Stay here forever. Gotta work tomorrow. Yuk. Should I take the quilt back? It looks so nice. But what about the geese? She tried to be conscious of animal rights. She filled the cat dish with the soft, smelly fish banquet. The cat began to chomp it down loudly, breaking the silence of the house. The cat once stole the Thanksgiving turkey, dragging it all over the house. He was always ruining things. It was too cold to sit in the living room and she didn't want to turn the heat on yet. The heating bill would double. Once it was it was on, it was on for the winter.

I should take the quilt off the bed if I am going to return it. It didn't say anything about down feathers on the packaging, perhaps it was a way of hiding it. They were always covering the truth. Probably didn't want ladies chasing them out of the store yelling. "You killed the geese." But when did it stop? When did caring stop and peace begin? I'll take it back. I guess. She walked into her room. The cat was puking on her bed. Damn cat. Well that ends that. Mother Nature has her revenge.

It was just one of those days that the Trojan horse spits you out of its guts. Going to bed early. And later, as she slipped between the white cotton sheets and down comforter with the wet spots, she wondered if she would fall into a sweet, soothing, peaceful sleep or would she dream of a thousand, naked, white geese marching after her.



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21 January 2000

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As I write this letter my eye is drawn again and again to the name of your town, Sunnyvale...today in Boston it is overcast and freezing cold, with a 6-inch blanket of snow on the ground and what the weatherman called a "harsh arctic wind." I do hope that Sunnyvale is as nice as it sounds; I'm enjoying sitting here dreaming about it.

Yours sincerely,

Abigail Coyle  
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